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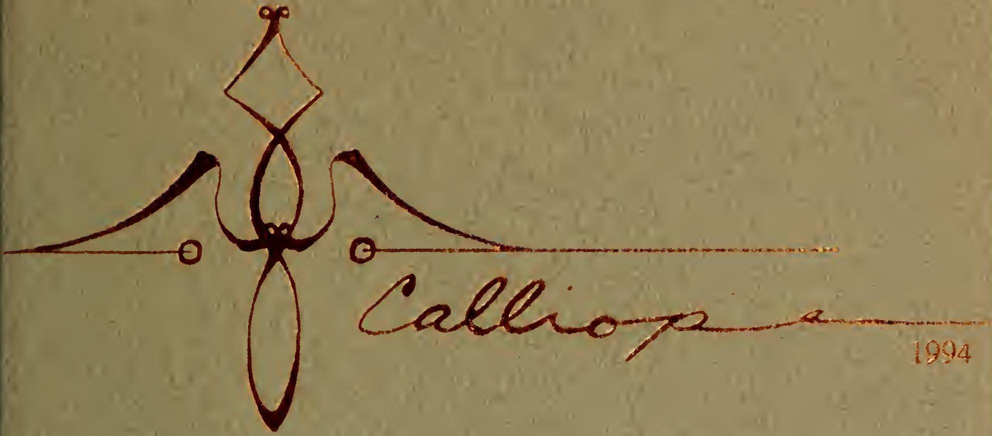

Calliope

1994

Calliope

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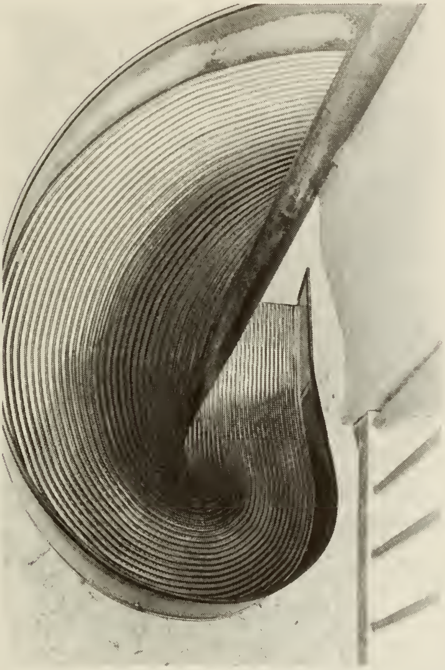

Burnt Hands
gelatin silver print
Donna Callahan

Volume XI
Armstrong State College

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Donna Callahan

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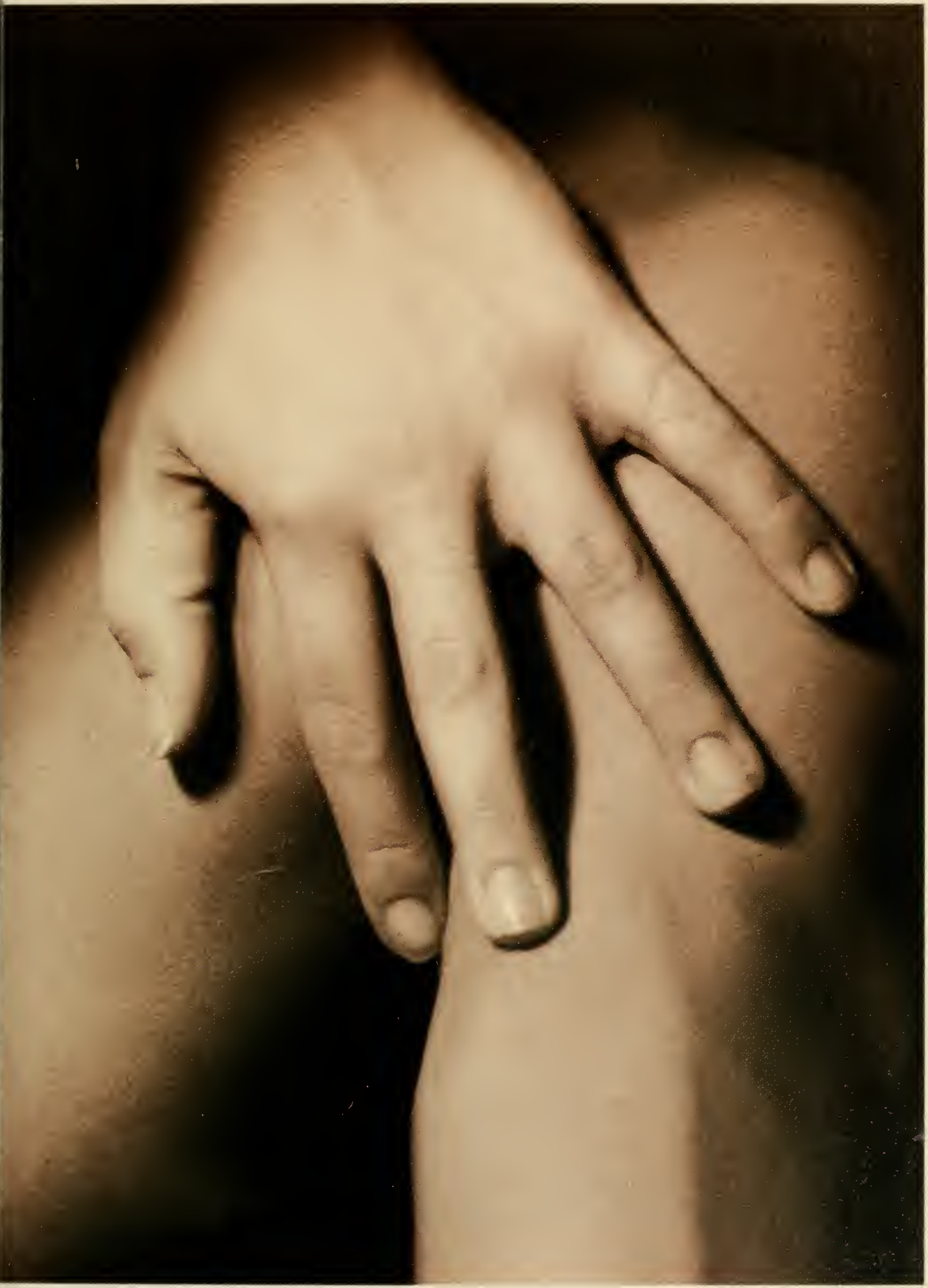


Hand, Meet Shoulder
gelatin silver print
Chris Foster

Rebecca Morgan

Geraldine Provence

Heat waves shimmer over the half-grown corn stalks, but she cannot wait. It will need digging before feeding time. The stock will stray if she is late penning them. Taking the heavy spade, she paces six feet from the center and to the side of Aunt Grace and starts moving the black earth.

He'd took sick of a sudden on Monday late and died this morning afore day. Thursday it is. Josiah had worked the place with her help since they had moved out here from her parents' home fifteen summers past.

Placing her heavy brogan and her weight onto the spade, she struggles, digging deeper into black earth under the shade of the oak. Josiah had picked the burial site when they had lost Aunt Grace. Said it commanded the valley.

The sun hangs low as she hefts herself out of the finished grave and pauses only to drink deeply from the gourd dipper on the water shelf. She enters the cabin and shortly reappears silhouetted in the doorway bearing the weight of her dead husband on her shoulders. He is wrapped in the sheet from their bed, on which he died. Rebecca angles herself and the body out the cabin door and bends her knees to feel with her foot for the block step, all the while careful to keep the weight balanced, remembering her Pa's words, "Use your common sense, girl. Get under the load and use balance."

She lays him out parallel to the hole, and from inside the grave, eases his lean corpse down beside her and uses her arms to sweep the loose earth into the grave.

"This'll have to do 'til morning. No varmints can get at you. I'll finish and say words over you proper at first light."

Tomorrow, she thinks, will be soon enough to take the trail out to his brother's place. His only kin. She'll need to get on back afterward. The varmints know when you're not about the place.

There is no need nor sense in skipping the dusk routine. Feed the cow and the other animals, make the place secure against the night prowlers. She heard a panther scream like a woman from out across the valley two nights before and can ill afford to lose the shoats or the horse needed for plowing. The cow stands waiting outside the pen, where her calf is bawling to be fed.

Old Hap sets up a ruckus. She calls out to him and clips the fastener to his collar to keep him in the clearing. He is as good a watchdog as can be, but needs restraint. Otherwise, he's likely to be off on the trail of a rabbit.

The firelight gives off enough light to see by as she moves about the sparsely furnished familiar room. Everything is in its place. Rebecca hangs her hat beside Josiah's, ties on her apron and sets one place at the table -- one plate and a spoon.

The cabin is solid. She and Josiah had set it level into hillside, using logs split square for the foundation and support beams. It had been Josiah's thought to haul flat stones from the creek bottom on which to rest the foundation and fill in the openings between the logs. To keep the winter winds out, he had said. The stone chimney, too, is solid. Rebecca puts two pieces of the firewood Josiah had split on the coals to warm the evening meal of corn meal mush, which she will eat with beans from the day before.

Tall, raw-boned, her plain features are framed by a mass of curly, greying auburn hair, which she coils each morning into a bun at the nape of her neck. She unwinds the hair by pulling out the three bone hairpins given to her by her Pa when she was just a girl.

Rebecca's Pa had brought the family, her Ma and his sister, Grace, and herself, out to the wilderness of Kentucky from Virginia when she was eight years old. Rebecca had not minded helping him with his planting, crop tending and such during the day and looked forward to his teaching her to read and write by the fire in the evenings. She thinks of her Pa and longs for some kin to share the passing of Josiah as she drifts off to sleep, bone weary.

Dead and buried. Before day, she wakes to the thought of the grave still raw and the words not said. Rebecca moves quickly to hitch the horse to the wagon to haul stones. She chooses flat limestones, which she raises by prying them from the creek bottom with a pole for leverage and slides the stones, one at a time on two thin poles, which she has leaned against the creek bank. Rebecca then props the poles against the wagon bed and quickly eases the stones into the wagon, thinking how she and Josiah had come in the early days to picnic in the clearing near the creek. Used to lay out on the grass and watch the clouds sail past and talk about things. What they'd name the children and such like.

Yesterday before day, Rebecca recalls, she had bathed the body, combed the hair and mustache, closed the eyes and tied the jaw. She had dressed him in clean clothes. Josiah, who was always first up to light the fire and see to morning chores, looked to Rebecca as if he were play-acting, patiently satisfying some whim of hers -- playing possum -- so as she could see the fit of the shirt and trousers she had sewed for him in the winter.

Rebecca pushes the heavy stones off the wagon, where they fall beside Josiah's grave. The horse stands patiently in the traces. Sunlight is just filtering into the valley, burning off the morning mist, when she finishes rolling the stones into place. She stands at the foot of the grave and speaks the words asking their Maker to look kindly on Josiah, who never harmed a living thing except out of necessity. And, then to Josiah, that she will let his brother, Ben, know of his passing and be back by dark the next day.

Josiah had been troubled off and on with pain in his side for several days, but never let on much. But she could tell by the way he was off his food and the drawn look about him. When she'd asked him, he'd made light of it, saying only, "It'll pass."

Monday he'd come in early from the bottom, where he'd been staking the young apple trees. He'd been all bent over, holding his side and sweating.

Even had Rebecca known the seriousness, it would have been of no use. The closest doctor was a twenty-five mile ride one way and she would not have left Josiah alone to ride out.

Unhitching the wagon in the space beside the corncrib, she puts a blanket and gear on the horse and mounts. Horse and rider disappear from the clearing. Only the creak of leather and the occasional snort of the horse break their steady, silent, westward movement with the sun toward the main road.

It would be different if there was someone else about the place. Had there been children, surely they would have been able to raise them and there would now be a family to see to. Or if there was only someone needing a home. The place gives plenty for a family. It always had.

This plentifulness was how she and Josiah had been able to have Aunt Grace live with them. She'd been a simple soul, kind of childlike, who depended on them. It had been a sad time when Aunt Grace passed. They had known she would die young, since it is the way with those who are forever children. Still, she and Josiah had grieved for Aunt Grace.

Rebecca and Josiah used to smile remembering her, how with hands on hips, head to one side, Aunt Grace, with assumed seriousness, would tell Josiah that he needed to see to that Old Hap. Old Hap had been chasing the squirrels from the dooryard. One squirrel, in particular. The squirrel which ate corn and shelled acorns from Aunt Grace's hand.

With six grains of corn and two shelled acorns in her open palm, Aunt Grace would sit on the stoop, look straight ahead and wait. Pretty soon, here would come Fluffy Tail to eat daintily, while Aunt Grace slowly lowered her eyes to watch, hardly daring to breathe. Aunt Grace expected Josiah to take Hap in hand and teach him to mind.

For the longest time afterward, it had seemed that Aunt Grace was beside her, or Rebecca would hear her chair scrape, only to realize that she was gone.

Rebecca wrote in a tablet everything she could recall about Aunt Grace in the winter following her death. She spoke to her through the journal about happenings since her passing as if Aunt Grace were somehow aware of the changing seasons and Fluffy Tail looking for his friend. She had continued putting the six grains of corn and two shelled acorns on the stoop where Fluffy Tail could get at them. *And yes, Aunt Grace, you'll notice that Old Hap has learned to leave the squirrels in the dooryard alone.*

In the evenings Rebecca and Josiah would sit a spell before going to bed. The stillness was everywhere, after Aunt Grace died. Josiah had looked to Rebecca, and they spoke quietly remembering Aunt Grace's fractiousness when the evening ritual of "Who is your favorite aunt?" was forgotten. On hearing "Aunt Grace," she had hugged them and gone to bed, content that they should be the ones to blow out the lantern and bank the fire.

The horse's steady rhythmic pace brings Rebecca out of the valley onto the ridge. It is a good three miles more before they will enter the main trail. There has never been enough passing to make a sign of a path from the cabin out. Seasons of dropped foliage in the oak thicket and pines blanket the ground, cushioning the sounds of their passing. The sun is warm on Rebecca's worn, black hat. The wide brim shades her eyes. Some mountain women go about bareheaded, but Rebecca has worn a hat when outdoors since working with her Pa as a child.

Rebecca has missed having a woman about for company. With another woman, there is the chance to talk about woman things. Some might ask why Rebecca never spoke of woman things to Josiah and her answer would take some thought and maybe she would not be able to give it words, saying it is an instinct like with the wild things just knowing their kind.

Watching for signs of water to relieve their thirst, Rebecca thinks how she had never been with a man other than Josiah. In the hills, the neighbors were scattered for miles and it was a rare passing that had brought anyone to her Pa's place. She had been content to live on the homeplace and took no particular offense at being a spinster. Then, who should come down from the mountains, but Josiah Morgan, offering himself to her Pa for whatever work needed doing. Rebecca's Pa had taken a liking to Josiah, when he saw the way he could hew a square beam from a felled oak. Her Pa and Josiah had put up a barn and laid a supply of posts by that winter. The new barn had swelled with the corn they brought in that year.

Rebecca and Josiah had talked now and again. He told her how he had come out from Kentucky after the war and had trapped for pelts to sell to the traders. It was a good life, he said, for a man. It was lonesome though. Most times, trappers would hunt in pairs and share the work. The life of a trapper is dangerous, especially when laying for the big game. A man can get killed easy. But

Josiah was of a mind to homestead and asked Rebecca's Pa for her hand. "Well, seeing as how it's her hand you're asking for," he had answered, "you'd best ask her." Josiah did and she accepted.

They moved out to his land when winter let up and by autumn had the cabin built and the first land cleared for planting. Talk, work and plan is what they did. It was a good time. Their bodies young and strong. Full of dreams. Rebecca had written of it in the tablet. *You remember, I told you about us picking the names for our children. We had quite a time with that. First, he'd want to name our boy after his Pa, Samuel. Then, I'd want to name the girl after my Ma, Abigail.*

Back and forth it went. And, they waited. One year, then two. First thing they knew, five years had passed and then ten. And, in the meantime, Aunt Grace had come to live with them.

Rebecca notices trees and brush growing thicker, giving way to shorter grass, making good grazing for stock. She lets the horse have the lead, and they move down under the dense shade of the treeline and then out the other side, where she hears running water. The horse canters toward the sound and she gets down and walks to the water's edge. They drink. She ties the reins to a tree limb.

Moving out of the bright sunlight, Rebecca takes off her hat and feels the coolness of the light breeze stirring the oak leaves overhead. She can hear the horse chomping grass and the occasional jangling of his gear. The stubbled grass is rough on her hands as she lowers herself to rest against the tree. The biscuit and meat she brought from the cabin taste good, but she can not dwell on food.

Smoothing the coarse fabric of her skirt, she hugs her knees to her chest. Rebecca feels tears well up and wills her grief to be still. Rocking, back and forth, she does not notice the cawing of assembling crows in the pines, but focuses on a clump of wire grass and the whir of a cricket.

The horse is restless and stamps the dirt. Rebecca rises, brushes the twigs from her frock and walks to the water to wash her face and hold the wet kerchief to her throbbing temples.

"Come on, horse, we have a long way yet to ride," she says leaning against the horse's neck, before swinging into the saddle to move back onto the trail.

"Rebecca," Josiah had shouted, "come see! We must have brought this one with us." The cow, a gift from her parents, had calved too soon after their move for the calf to be the offspring of the bull they had bought off a family on the way out.

And, there was the time Josiah had surprised Rebecca saying, "Let's go fishing later in the day and see if the trout will bite." He had been anxious to search out where their hen was nesting and used the hen for an excuse to walk to the creek. They had walked apart and fished separate, catching four trout between them. Josiah had set the fish on the grass, and grinning, peeled off his clothes and called for Rebecca to come on in.

They were sunburned from the outdoors. Naked skin showed pale timid bodies in the sun dappled pool, where they had earlier fished for their supper. Josiah and Rebecca waded, touching. At first feeling the chill wetness, they moved about to warm up and then embraced below the surface, only to burst breathless into the sunlight. Josiah was first to call out, "Rebecca, come. Let's get on back. We'll sleep sound from playing in the creek." The sun warm in their clothes, they lingered laughing and talking, gathering the fish and poles. Rebecca had had to remind him, "Josiah, I'll help you get the stock fed, so we'll have time before night to bring up the hen."

Arriving at the clearing, she hears first one dog and then another barking. Rebecca tosses the reins over the gate post and dismounts. Sarah Morgan comes out onto the stoop, wiping her hands on her apron and squinting into the sun. She recognizes Josiah's wife and embraces her, sensing there is trouble, else Rebecca would not have come alone on horseback.

"Sarah, Josiah died yesterday morning. I promised him I would let Ben know." Sarah acknowledges the news, clucking and shaking her head side to side, and allows, "I knew it had to be something dire when you rode in by yourself." Sarah hurries to hammer the bell for Ben and their grown son, Emanuel, to come in from the woods, where they are snaking fallen timber.

Rebecca sits long into the night with Josiah's kin, telling how it had been with them. "Josiah has a good stand of apple trees in the bottom, Ben. You remember, he got those trees from your orchard. He was proud of them, too. Said we'll be drying apples afore long." Rebecca goes on to let them know the condition of the place, practical things, like the corn half grown and promising, the clutch of eggs that had hatched off and all the biddies still accounted for when she had ridden out.

Ben and Sarah sit close on either side of Rebecca. They speak out their concerns as to whether she can manage alone. Ben shifts to face her. "Rebecca," he says, "Josiah was my only kin outside this family here. It's fitting now that you should look to us. Emanuel has his eye on a girl from across the neighboring valley. Wants to marry. Would you be willing for Emanuel and his wife to live with you?"

Rebecca does not speak for a time. She thinks instead of the clearing back at the cabin, tracks on tracks forming in the dooryard, and the mark of her hard soles on the creek path, wearing the dirt down.

"They will be most welcome," she answers.

At first light, in the saddle, Rebecca flicks the reins and the horse moves out to retrace the steps of the day before.

It had been a day such as this, but in the autumn, when Rebecca's Pa had rode out to tell her and Josiah that her Ma had died. He had stayed only long enough to rest a spell and tell of it--how she had been ailing with her legs and feet swelling and shortness of breath. He had found her dead in bed beside him. Rebecca thinks of her Pa now, how he had just gone right on working the farm, doing what needed to be done. *I remember Pa. I remember. They say age brings acceptance of things in life. Necessity brings acceptance, Pa. Age just makes it more certain.*

Old Hap sets up a raucous welcome, barking. Tail flipping, he circles Rebecca and the horse. She had felt guilty shutting him up, but he was needed about the place. Old Hap, as she had known he would, had climbed out of the corncrib by way of the lean-to as soon as he had quit barking at the closed door.

Rebecca secures the place against the dark. Tonight, the glow from the fireplace is not enough. She lights the lamp. Familiar sounds of the valley echo out across the bottom. The whippoorwill calls, is quiet, then calls from the far side of the valley. Rebecca feels the lonesome sound, the whippoorwill's call, and thinks how the wild things call out to one another, just as folks do and grieve, too. Seems the natural way is to call out. Rebecca longs to scream like the panther and hear an answering cry of recognition.

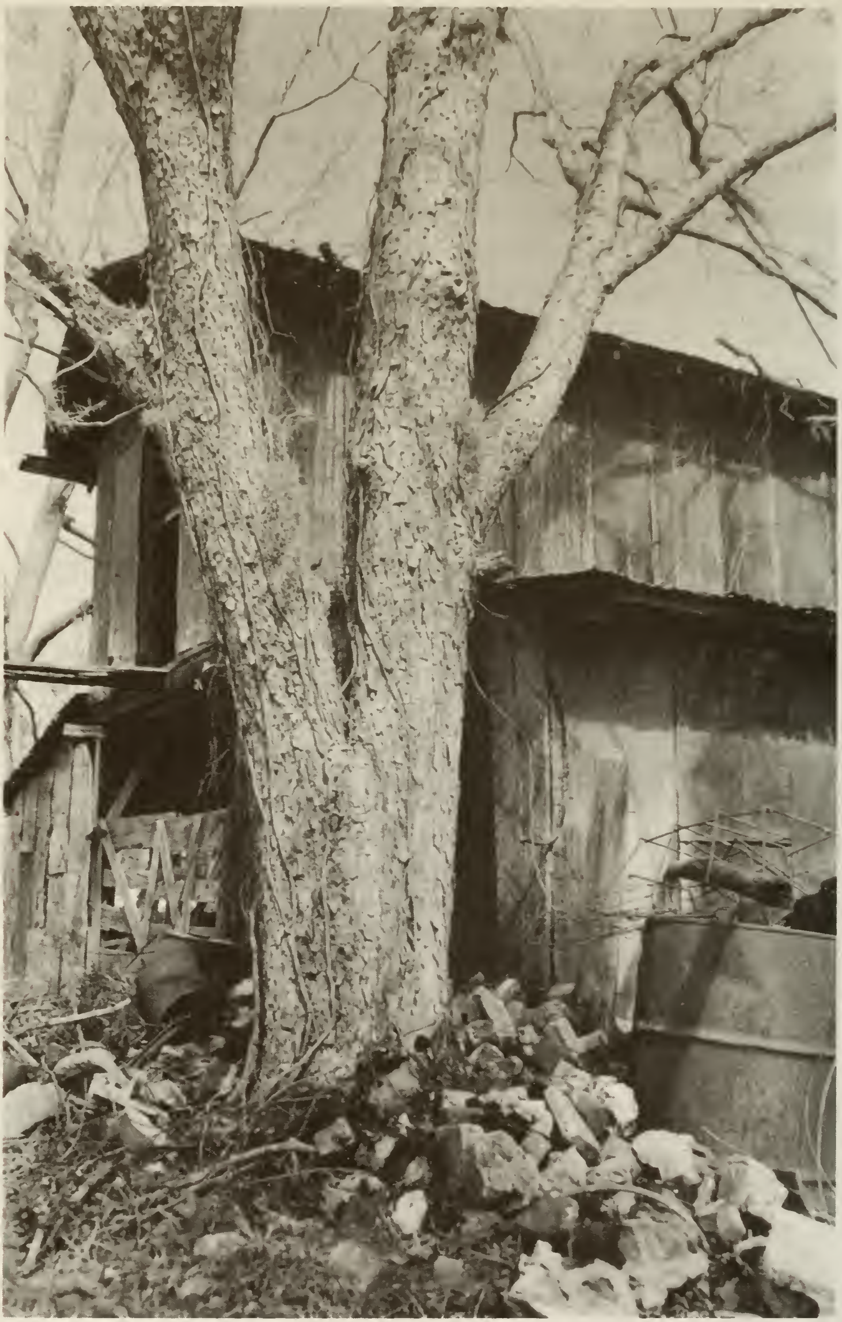
She takes the pocketknife that had been Josiah's from her pocket and sharpens the wooden pencil, letting the shavings fall into her lap. Rising, she empties her apron over the hearth. Sparks fly up the chimney as the shavings hit embers.

Josiah, I've been to tell Ben about you. We're going to have someone on the place again. You remember the comfort Aunt Grace was even with her being simple. Ben and I talked. Emanuel is aiming to take a wife. They will live on the place with me.

She sits gazing into the fire, idly caressing the small, oval stone Josiah had found in the creek. Josiah, she thinks, you kept a light kindly way with you all our time together. You were forever bringing in a pretty and leaving it for me to find, the first Johnny jumpup, a buttercup, a jaybird's feather stuck in my hat--this rock from the creek bottom so smooth I'd mistook it for a hen's egg sitting there on the eating table.

Letting down the heavy braid, Rebecca places the three bone hairpins on the mantel beside Josiah's pocketknife. Her bare feet cross the hewn oak floor and she kneels on the rag rug beside her bed. In bed, she moves into the cold imprint of Josiah, and the loneliness.

Old Hap rises from outside the doorway to answer her cries in the dark night. His howls echo through the valley. Scudding clouds give wings to the moon.



Werner's Barn
gelatin silver print
Sue Bishop-Stapleton

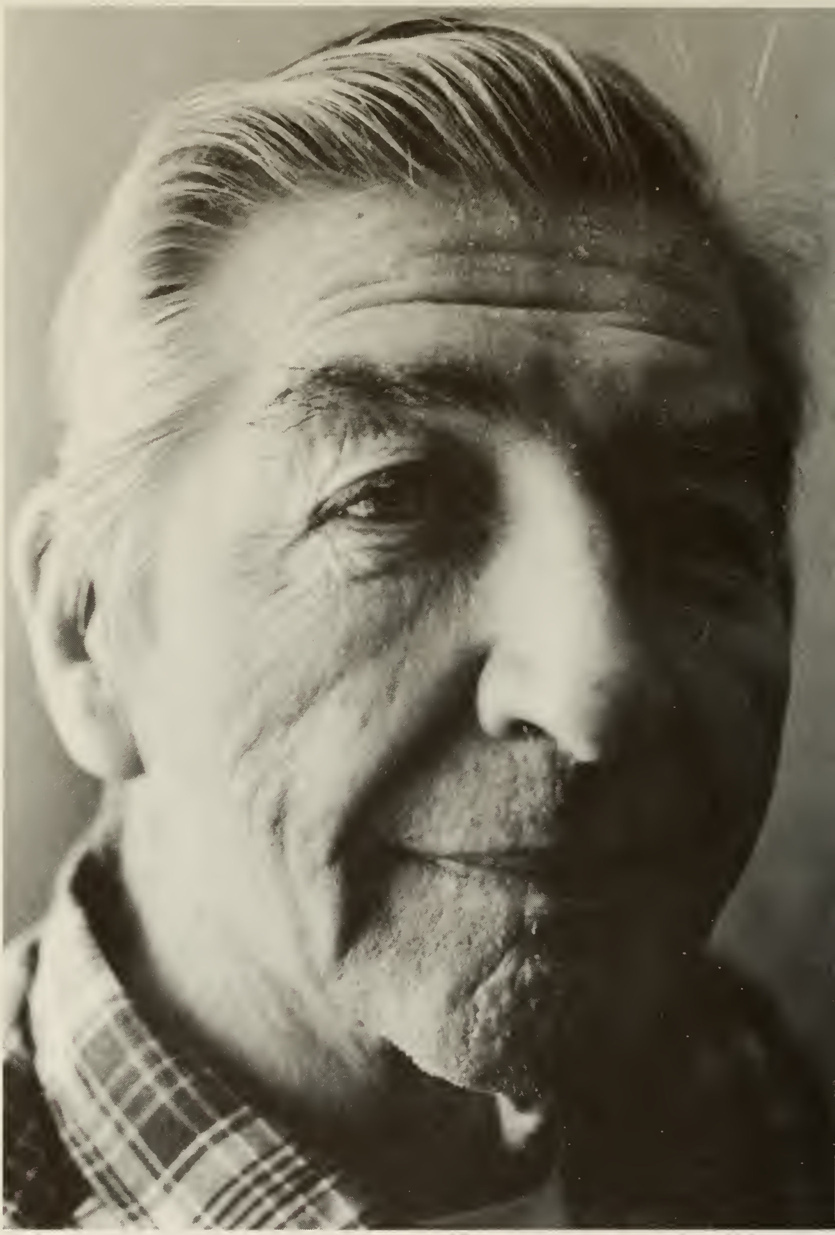
The Boneyard, Wassaw Island, February 1994
for Dana

We name the place with our marrow
metamorphosized in bleached wood and air. Spaces
that hold sacred another's pain hold the walking through
arthritic hip twists and elbow branches that ghost my living
flesh.

We stand between histories; the waves keep
and sound decisions already made,
choices still to make.

We mark raccoon prints, delicate tracings
point to language offshore,
chart the knowing when to leave,
what to leave behind.

Martha Marinara



Fire Man
gelatin silver print
Stephanie Raines

Susan

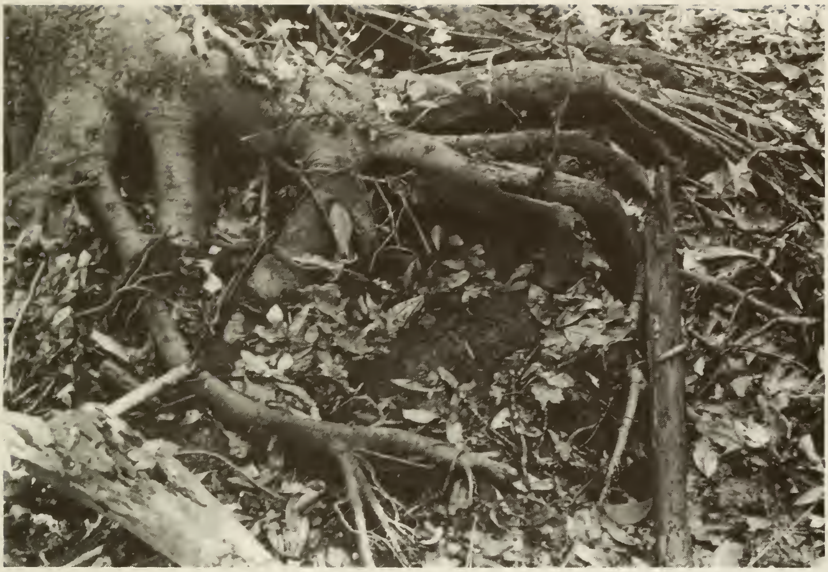
gelatin silver print

Stephanie Raines

The Mud of Me

I grab at nothing
In the mud
My hands are digging
Scraping downward to harder ground
I let the soup of clay
Swallow my arms
And cover my face
As I raise my body
Covered in gray
To the fire in the sky
I feel the lumps
Crust onto my skin
Though my body aches
And the mud slows my motion
It feels good
That I can no longer move.

Brant Freeman



Tree Nineteen

gelatin silver print

Lee Nettles

The Partings

When I left Cork in '55,
I thought meself a strong man to survive that sorrow.
But now I know that I felt that way
Because I was certain
That never again would I face such loss.
I was born a child of famine,
And many's the keen of lamentation that I have heard.
And yet I remember the voice of my father
As he lent to the skies a kindly hope
In the hills of Kilmichael in West Cork.
'Twas there I was parted from all I loved,
From hearth, and kin, and storied lands,
And I was certain
That never again would I face such loss.

But Christmas week in '64,
The Regulars were pulled from our line of works
And marched through the streets of Savannah.
'Twas midnight, and we were the veterans
In Hardee's coastal army.
As we entered Savannah the shelling began,
And the people ran screaming in the streets
As the shells tore through their homes.
They were Irish, and Cracker, and Negro, and Jew,
And I heard in their cries, the cries of my people.
And I felt the lash of anger and shame
As I felt at Cobh harbor, when last I held my father.
Though he trembled in my arms, the voice was strong,
" 'Tis Americay for ye ! "

Our bridge was a pontoon of rice barges,
Framed by the light of the Yank's shelling,
And our own engineers as they set off charges
In the boats of the harbor.
We cut loose the barges as we crossed,

Firing many along the way,
Until we stood on the far shore.
Such a scene of desolation . . . of drifting fire and smoke.
Padraic slipped beside me as the Regulars began to march.
" 'Tis strange and lovely, " he softly spoke.
" Aye, " said meself, " before, it was a town I lived in,
And now it is my home. "

O land of aching beauty, ye have taken me so,
And now I see your ruin
As I wander famished in this land born to plenty.
Old heart that is breaking,
See me through this hour,
That I might bear the weight of these partings.

Jim Buttimer

Home

You have a good home
When it is there
You have food to eat
When their bites don't choke you
You have a comfortable bed
When their pillows let you breathe
You have a protecting roof
When it doesn't collapse on your head
You've got love
When it isn't hating you
You've got a good life

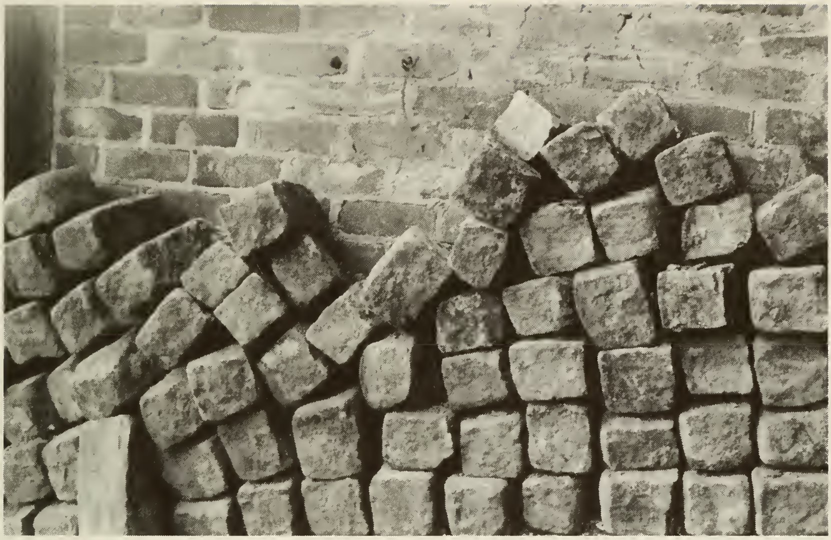
And then some.

Brant Freeman

On the Mall, 1987

WAR.
Sold with lies
(would you buy a war from this man?)
bought with lives
(long black wall)

Glenn Murphy



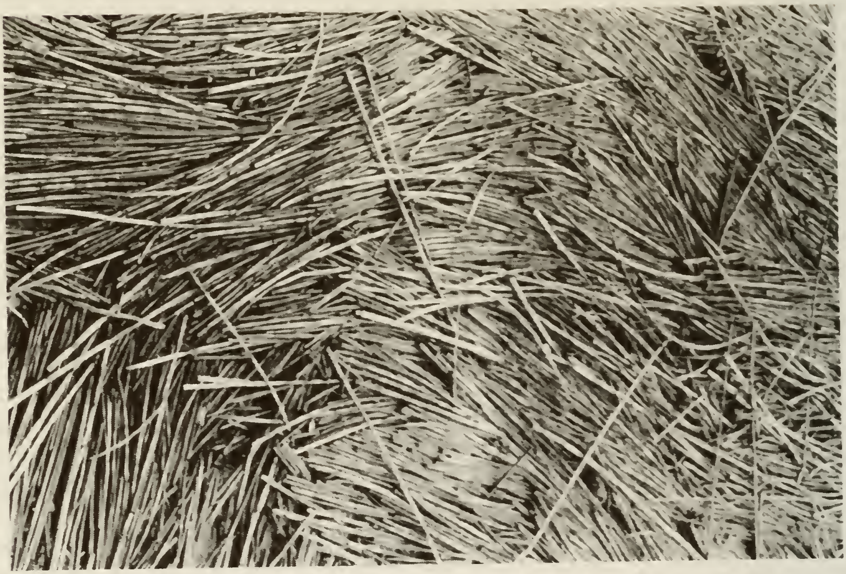
Against the Wall
gelatin silver print
Elizabeth Welsh

The Cradle

Half charred Oak trees,
their branches almost touching,
encircle fallen chimneys and ruined timbers
creating a dark cradle, a refuge
for old rhythms and new.
Hazy impressions of a pale slender lady
in a soft yellow gown
glimmer through new growths of wild roses,
their bright pink cascades incongruent
against cold black ashes.
Petals, grasping a gentle breeze,
challenge the stillness
and throw showers of color
to the gray burned earth.
Time seems disconcerted,
as though searching through
the tangled rabbit warrens
that surround these ruins.
Twisting and folding
what was into what will become,
blending yesterdays into tomorrows,
as drops of Spring rain fall
on fragments of jeweled glass.
The still living branches
of the great Oaks whisper and wave
as storm clouds arrive.
Their blackened comrades,
caught in rigid death,
are unmoving.
Sensations belonging to yesterday
linger yet, even in the beginning rain.

Flashes of colors against darkening skies--
glimpses of sunlight through stained glass.
The sound of a horse and buggy,
echoing faintly from the obscure lane
mingles with the rain's soft music.
Quickly, then, they are gone--
as the jarring thunder
dilutes the stillness
and the strangeness.

Brenda Talley



Marsh Grass
gelatin silver print
Jeanette Pastrana

Africa

I visited you like a dark closet,
vast room full of acacia trees,
wandering elephants, and tall old men
walking alone--
I thought your solitude
would help me remember the rhythms I lost
or had never found before.

But the orange hot sky
was an unending mirage of movement;
bush, trees, animal and man
changed places, ate one another.
They folded into dust
on an endless plain.

I thought it would be different.
I thought I would be changed.
But in Africa, blood shed is the same red as mine,
and the blackened bruise of wars
is like any from where I come.
I look again into that secret place,
for that magical bird with a peaceful song,
and the sounds of ourselves
we have yet to hear.

Carlyn C. Bland

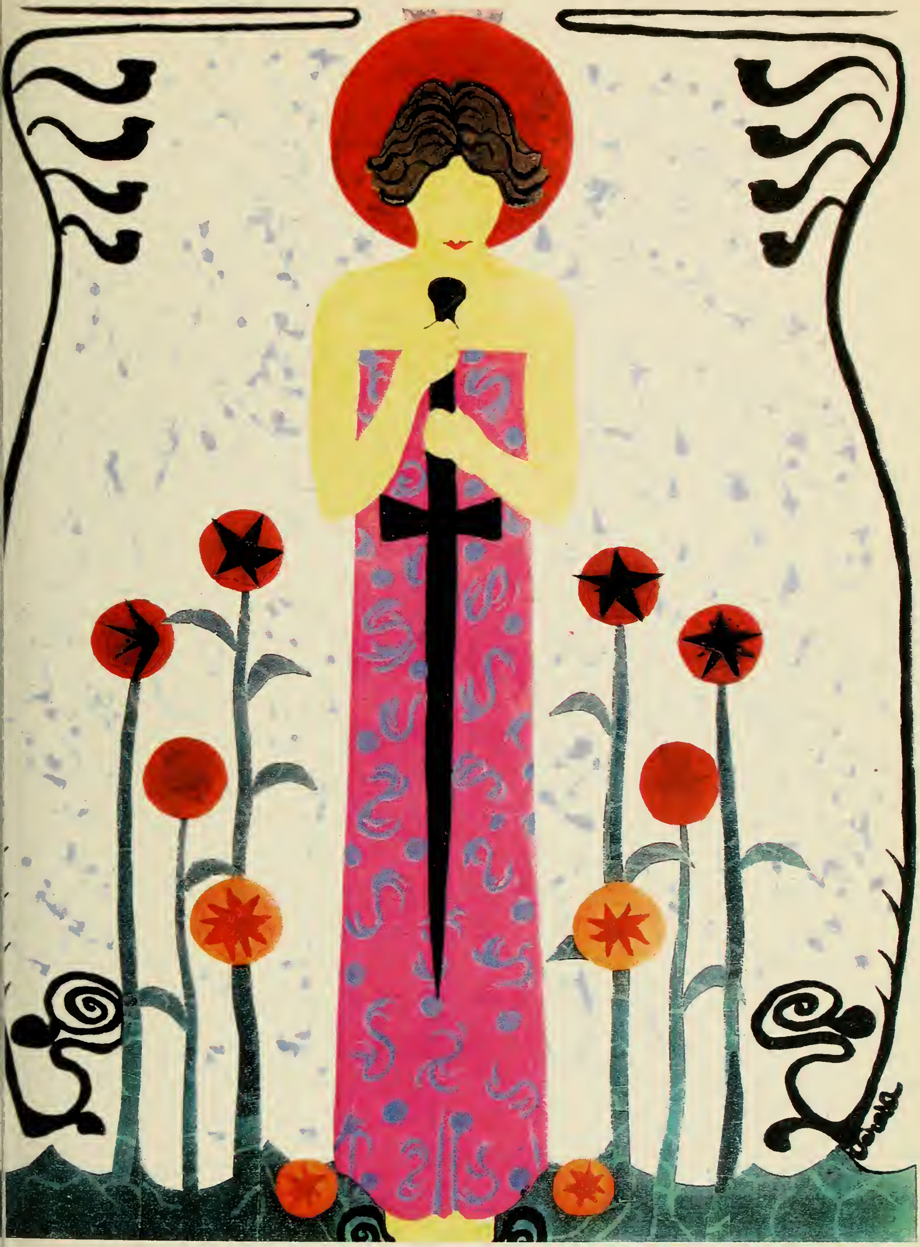
Drowning

Shall I tell you again how you move
me to move aside the stone
and not be buried next to Christ
or Mozart or Vincent or James Dean
or unknown other lovers doomed
by wooing good and sainthood, loving love?

Must I replay the part where you reveal
new meaning to the same old tide
as I resurface to your mouth and breast,
unearth once more that prized imperfect shell?

I'd crawl the beaches of this shrinking coast,
I'd even learn to swim (my stroke enough
to startle sharks), undo a star
before I'd lose the memory of the undertow,
forget the ages of your face and you on fire.

David Starnes



Woman With Sword Among Poppies
collage with acrylic
Theresa Anderson

Night Swimming

Once, when inspired by a midsummer's moon,
I snatched up my car keys and an old blanket.
The heat rose from the pavement in waves
As I drove into the deepening darkness.
I longed for the feel of seashell sprinkled sand
And the overpowering smell of ocean salt.

I could almost taste the pungent salt
In the air as I faced the golden moon
And sank to my knees in the light-soaked sand.
I spread the faded, near-forgotten blanket
And imagined being swallowed by the darkness,
Struck deaf by the crashing of the waves.

I wanted to be engulfed by the waves,
Wanted them to cover me with their salt
Kisses and hold me in the deep darkness
Of their embrace. The ever-present moon
Caused me to abandon my tattered blanket
For the comfort of fresh seaweed and sand.

I stood and dropped my clothes onto the sand,
Then ran into the whiteness of the waves.
The water warmed me more than had my blanket.
I licked my lips and tasted, not bitter salt,
But wine. All the while, the omniscient moon
Watched me swirl in the murky darkness

Of the sea. But she also split the darkness;
Her beams reflected off the wet sand
Revealing my naked flaws. How cruel, Moon,
I thought as I slipped beneath the waves.
So illumined, not one grain of salt
Escapes her sight. I floundered for my blanket.

I shivered and struggled into the blanket.
Why couldn't I drown my sorrows in the darkness?
My eyes stung with bitter tears of salt.
I tried to brush away the clinging sand.
My body had not been purged by the waves.
My footprints remained, frozen by the moon.

The moon followed me through the darkness
And caused the waves I made to lose their salt.
I left my blanket buried in the sand.

Amy Rene Hartley

dropped

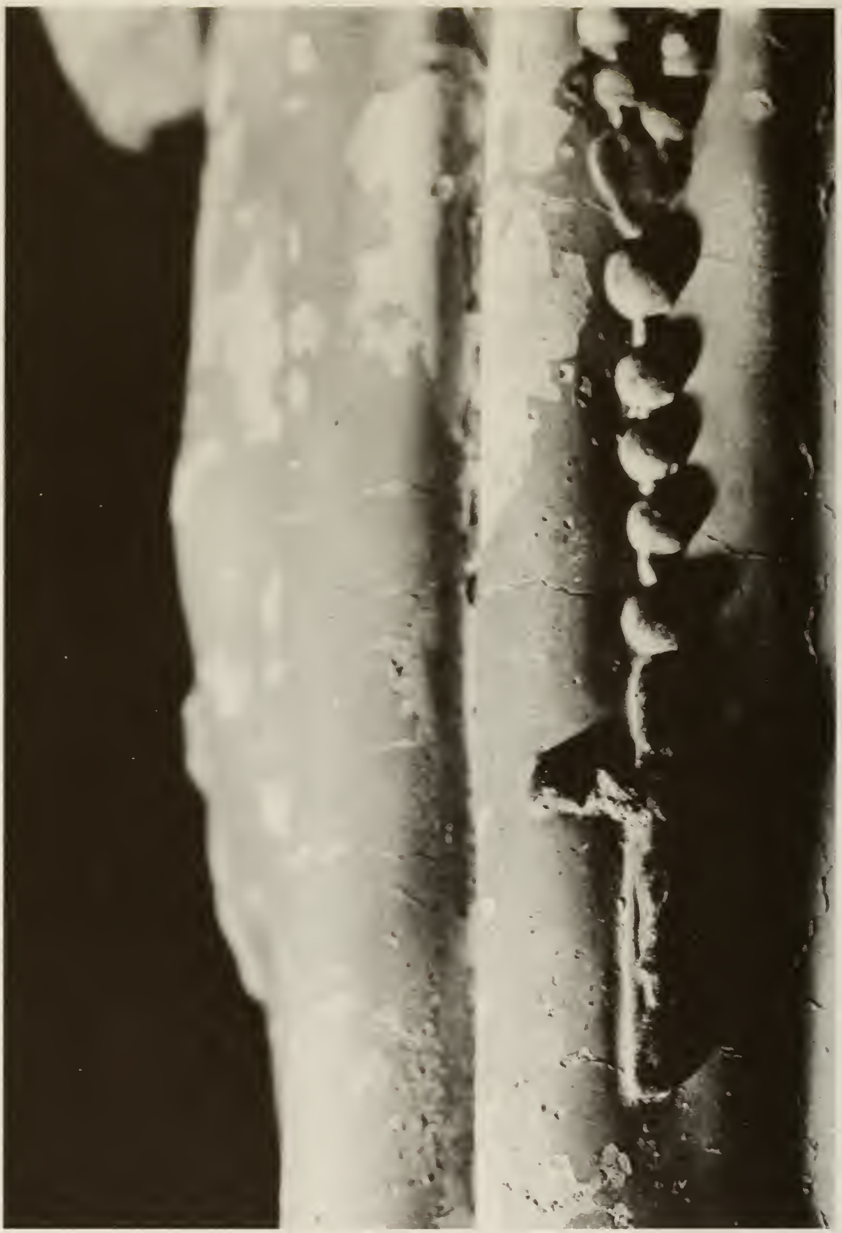
Oh why have you forsaken
The part that makes sense--
Little lamb dost thou care
Who made thee?
With your little neck broke in the fence

I went back to the clapboard house
And saw the ragged girl in the swing--
She asked me why and I told her then
There's a hole in the porch
"Don't go in."

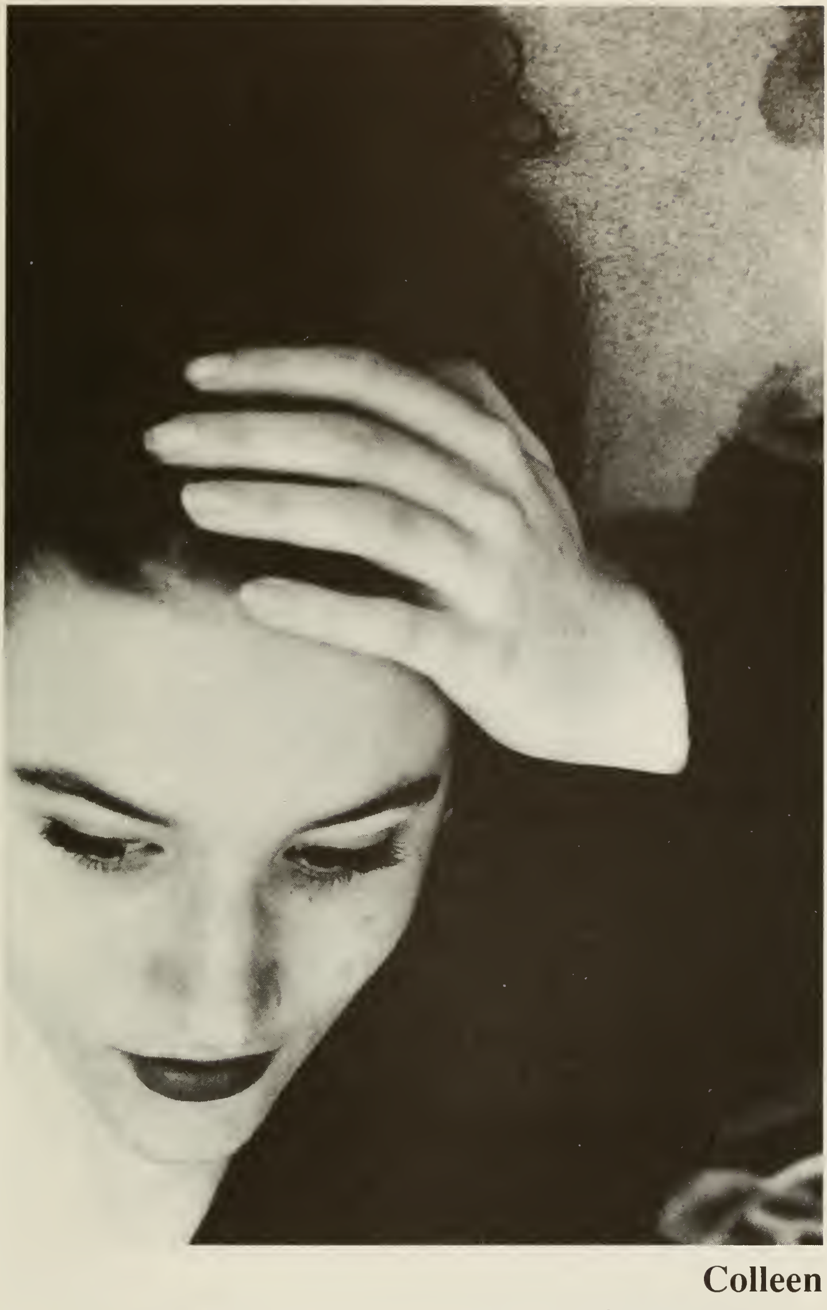
Oh why have you forsaken
Tyger, tyger in the night--
Lips wet with blood in the backyard
An old dead face, another dream, and
Then the drop

Remember when men knew God
I blew the horn to call him down
Floated for days and still no sign
But a hurricane, out of breath.

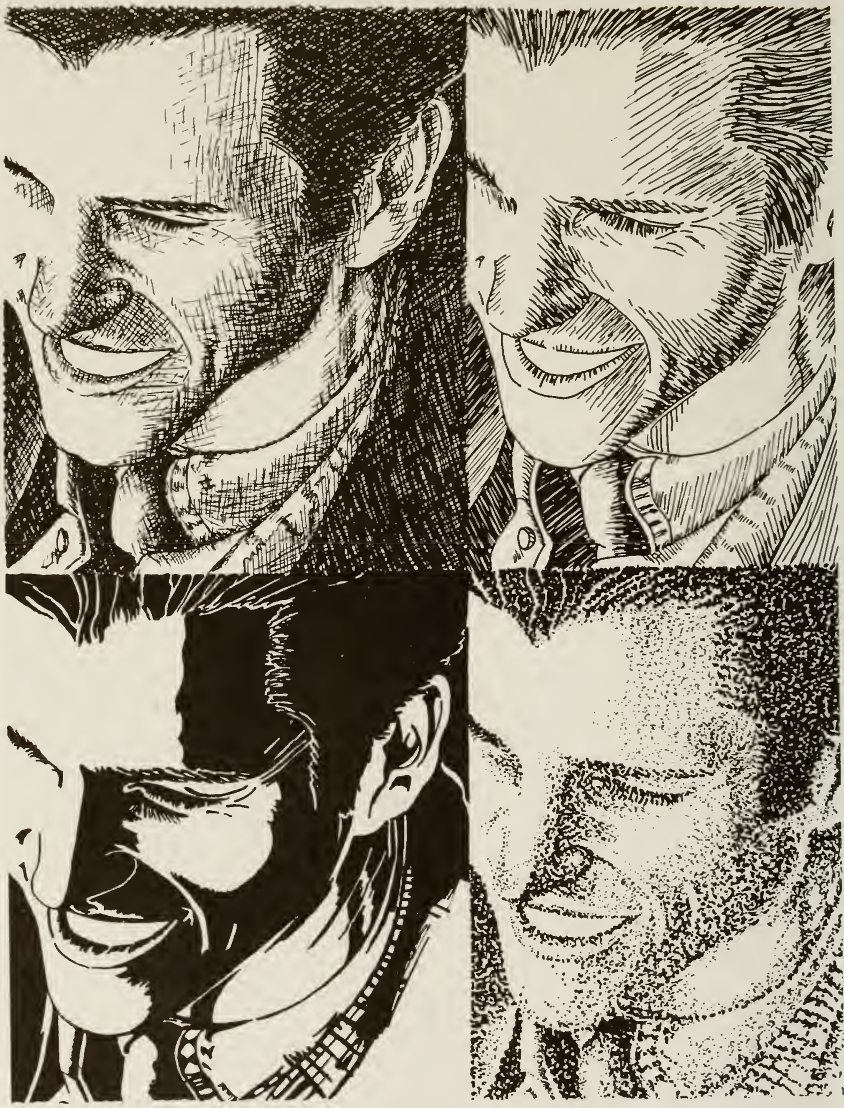
Lauretta Hannon



Rise Left
gelatin silver print
Jennifer Colson



Colleen
gelatin silver print
Shannon Varley



A Smile a Day

black line graphic

Stacy McClain

The Mental Office Party of Joe Shmoe

Kimberly Kent

"Hey," says one of Joe's Subconscious Thoughts, holding a martini in one hand and stopping one of Joe's Conscious Thoughts with the other. "Aren't you one of the Conscious Thoughts?"

"Why, yes," says the C.T. "I'm from the Moral Crossroads section of his mind."

"Wow," counters the S.T. "You're one of the big boys! Usually at these parties I end up meeting the guy who chooses what Joe will have for lunch. I've never actually met a morality player."

"Well," says the C.T. humbly. "I've just been promoted. I used to work in the Joe-at-his-job section -- you know, sorting papers, talking on the phone -- that sort of thing. All this right-and-wrong stuff is pretty new to me."

"That's great!" says the S.T. genuinely happy. "From what I understand about Conscious Thoughts, you guys don't move around very much, so you must be someone pretty special."

By this point the C.T. is blushing from all the praise. "I doubt that," he says. "It's just that Joe is going through kind of a big deal right now. I'm sure you've heard about it. He's considering having an affair with that woman in his office, but he really loves his wife and all that--"

"Wait!" The S.T.'s mouth falls open. "This affair idea has worked its way into echelons so high that they're starting to move around Conscious Thoughts?"

"Yeah, they need the extra thought power."

The S.T. nods his head enthusiastically. "Hot damn!" he mutters then slaps the C.T. on the back affably. "I started that whole thing!"

"Really?" asks the C.T. Now he's the one who sounds impressed.

"Yeah," says the S.T. "I did this whole dream thing about her and a dolphin -- it was pretty racy." He nudges the C.T. with the elbow of his arm not holding the martini.

"I'm surprised you got that through your supervisors," the C.T. responds. "We could never get away with anything like that."

"Well," says the S.T. "Our supervisors are pretty lax. You can get away with almost anything in the Subconscious. The only rule seems to be: the stranger the idea, the better."

"Hey," the S.T. says, changing the subject. "You see that guy over there, the one asleep by the punch bowl? Who the hell is that?"

"Oh," answers the C.T. "That's the delegate from the Unconscious department. They are some seriously lazy bastards over there. They never send more than one guy to these parties, and he always falls asleep the second he gets in the door."

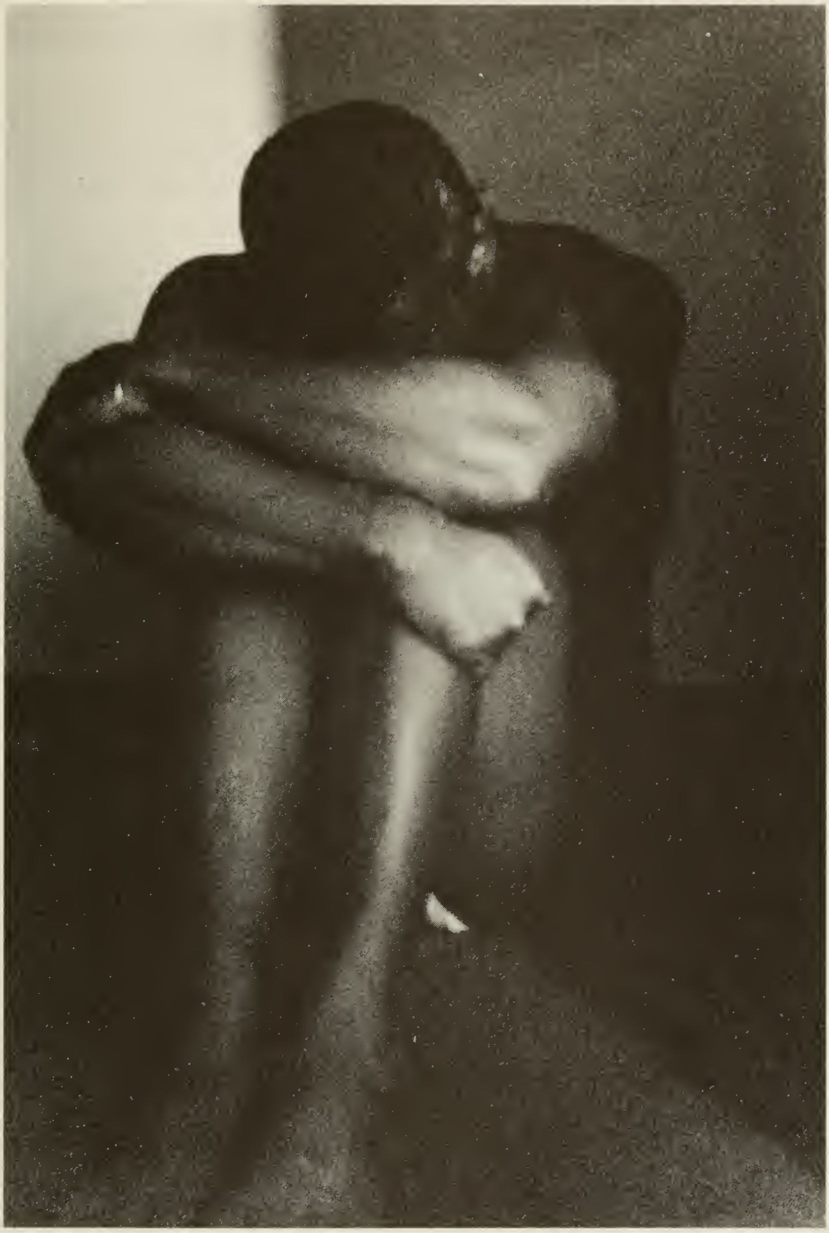
"Some people!" sighs the S.T.

"Well, look." The C.T. glances at his watch while he speaks. "It's getting late, and you probably have to be starting work pretty soon." The S.T. nods and the C.T. continues, "So, I'll be getting out of your way. I'm tired and it's time to go home."

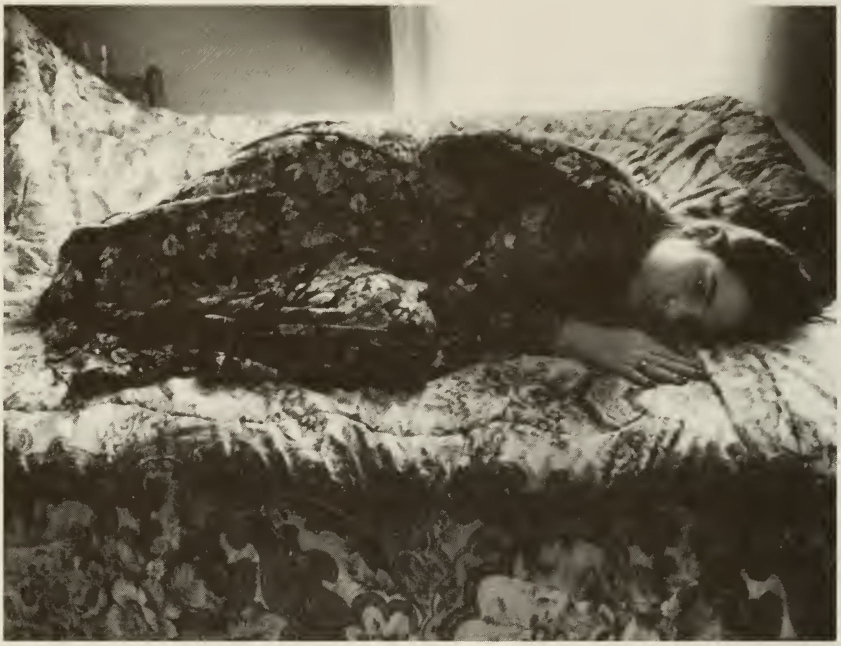
The S.T. nods. "It's been good talking to you," he says then pauses. "Hey, just to give you a little edge, let me tell you what I'm working on right now."

"You'd do that?" the C.T. asks gratefully.

"Sure," says the S.T. "Think mid-life crisis. I know I am."



Nude
gelatin silver print
Shannon Varley



The Surrender
gelatin silver print
Jennifer Heidmann

Recollection #1, 1950 (six years old)

Lauretta Hannon

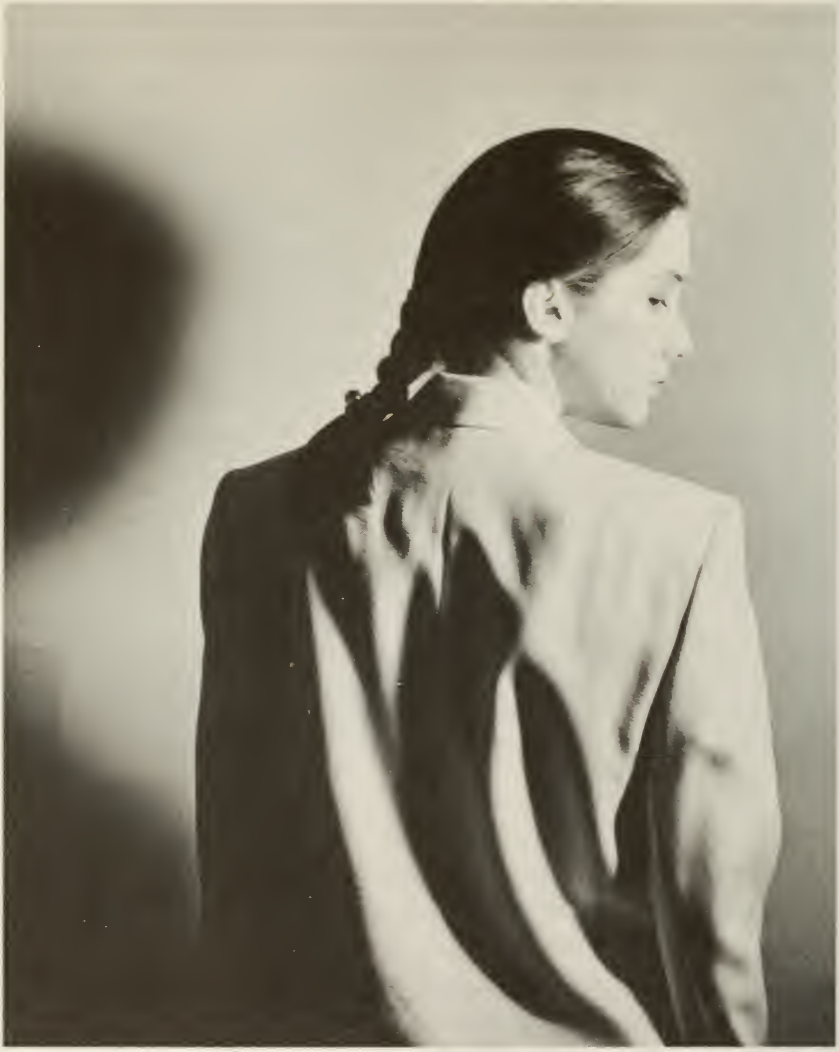
The Indian Princess remembers it all -- of being packed in a straw bed with three sisters and a brother in the dead winter, all ill and freezing cold -- the sudden sound of vomit hitting the slop jar. She recalls her brother Buddy ramming chicken shit down her throat and Granny Tanner's sure-fire cure for pink-eye, "Squat and pee into your hands; then rub your eyes real good." But what she remembers most is the way she felt when Mama left.

It was getting dark and the Indian Princess was scared. She had not seen Mama all day, and her papa, known to everyone as "Bennie T," was an infrequent visitor to the clapboard shack. He had Creek Indian blood and looked strange -- like a dark-skinned, itinerant Welshman -- all of five feet tall. When Bennie T did come round he would stumble trying to pick up the little girl -- leaving his smell of corn whiskey and Buttercup snuff all in her face. "You're my P.B.E. -- Princess Brown Eyes," he would slur, making the words with strained, exaggerated lips and great pungent exhalations.

Night fell on the porch and still no sign of Mama. Unknown to her children, she had made the escape to Florida with a man who had an automobile and was nearly handsome. Nobody in the town of River Wall would see her again for ten years.

When it was barely light the next morning, the children walked to town on the sharp dirt floor road. Their toes sank in the red Georgia clay -- the kind you could make death masks out of. The few scrappy patches of grass along the way seemed to band together.

The Indian Princess at last made her appearance in town, exhausted after carrying her nine-month-old sister the whole way. The girl who was to become the most beautiful woman in Johnston County played her first small scene quietly, without fumbling a line.



Laura
gelatin silver print
Laura Green

Slap Jack

Christina Van Dyke

When I was six we lived in a mobile home out off of Highway 80. My mom used to complain about how small the place was and how when you walked the walls shook. I thought we lived in a mansion. The neatest part about it was that the walls really did move. I came home one day after school to find our den had just grown about four feet. My dad had unlatched the paneled wall and expanded the room. I guess so my mom would stop whining. It was truly the coolest thing I had ever seen. We celebrated that night in our "new and improved den" by watching The Donny and Marie Show and eating lots of chocolate covered marshmallow cookies called pinwheels. My dad and I ended up making a mess and getting crumbs all over the couch and on our clothes. I was sent to the bathroom to wash my hands but stood in the hallway and licked the chocolate marshmallow mush from between my fingers instead. When I got back into the den my dad had the cards out on the coffee table.

"Ready to play Slap Jack, chocolate mouth?" he smiled. I was, and hurried around to the table to position my hand close to the cards. I watched him shuffle the cards, his big hands keeping them all organized and stiff. (Whenever I tried to shuffle we would spend ten minutes picking cards up off of the floor.) Tapping the cards on the table, dad reminded me of the rules. Again.

"You can't use both hands. And dads always win."

"Daaad!" I laughed. "Just go."

Slowly he would lay the cards down in the center of the table. The middle part was glass so whenever he picked one up from the deck I tried to catch a glimpse of its reflection before he laid it face up. Ten of diamonds. Four of clubs. The next one I knew was a face card because he slid it to the edge of the deck and then paused, teasing me about my hand being too close to his. I just wanted him to flip it over so I could slap it before he could. My hand edged its way closer to the deck. When he flipped it, it turned out to be the Queen of spades but I slapped it anyway. In all of the excitement we knocked over my mom's glass of diet Shasta and had to clear the table while she mopped up the magazines and the tv guide. I played with the cards on the floor while my dad helped my mom. I attempted to reshuffle but decided to search out all the Jacks and position them near the top of the deck so that I would know when they were coming up. Dad was preoccupied over by the couch and so he didn't see me. As soon as the coffee table was clean again I put them in the center ready to start a new game.

"You don't have to shuffle 'em, Dad. I did it for you."

As he settled himself on the floor beside me he took off his white t-shirt and threw it into the rocking chair that sat under the window.

"Frances, it's hot in here. Go turn the air down to 65," he yelled to my mom, who must have still been in the kitchen.

"O.K. , mess maker, you ready to lose?" he said as he nudged me with his elbow.

"Nuh huh," I said back, shaking my head back and forth so fast that my pig tails whipped me in the face. Once again the cards were eased from the deck and flipped upright, revealing spades, aces and hearts. After about eight cards, I thought for sure that a Jack would be next. Three cards later, the Jack of diamonds appeared and got slapped by my dad first. My hand slapped the top of his knuckles and I could feel the stone in the top of his class ring hitting my palm.

"What's wrong, slow poke? I thought you were going to win this time," he teased.

"I got three more chances to get the Jacks," I pouted. He laughed and waved the Jack of diamonds around in front of me.

"This is what a Jack looks like in case you forgot," he reminded.

"I can't play like this, Dad. I'm too hot in here," I whined as I pulled off my little yellow Garanimal's shirt with the calico cat on the front. I tossed the shirt across the room but missed the rocking chair. The yellow ball lay rumpled on the floor. My dad's hazel eyes just popped out in amazement.

"What are you doing? Get your shirt back on. Little girls don't go around without shirts on."

"Why not? You don't have a shirt on. I'm just hot like you," I pleaded.

"Frances!" he yelled. "Frances, come in here and tell Christina to get her shirt on."

I heard my mom padding around the corner so I crawled across the carpet to reach for my shirt. Bare feet and a faded pink terry cloth robe entered from the hallway. A little round mirror and silver tweezers clinked together as she set them down on top of the t.v.

"What's going on in here?" she questioned my dad, her voice tense with irritation. She looked at the twisted shirt in my hand.

"What did you do?"

"I'm hot," I snapped loudly. My face flushed with fear as I watched my mom's freshly tweezed eyebrows burrow into her forehead.

"Tell her to put her shirt on, Frances. Little girls don't go around bare chested. She's going to catch a cold," my dad said, moving from around the coffee table and settling down in his corner of the couch. His black-socked feet resting on the top of the Woman's Day magazine replaced the elbows that were there only minutes ago.

"Your dad's right. Get your shirt on. It's bedtime anyway," she announced as she headed towards me and scooted me out of the den and down the hall.

I stomped my feet as I headed to my room. The door to the bathroom shook from the vibration. Shutting my light out, I tossed myself on top of the Holly Hobby comforter on my bed. I lay crumpled on the cool sheets. Shirtless and shivering, I reached for my stuffed animal, Kitty, and tried to go to sleep sucking my thumb. It was sticky from the marshmallow goo I had not washed off earlier. I drifted off with the taste of chocolate in my mouth and the sound of my mom's voice through the paneled wall.

"Julian, are you coming to bed? Bring my mirror and tweezers when you do. And turn the air down a bit. It's hot back here."

Beyond the Stairs

gelatin silver print

Elizabeth Welsh

Blue Glass

Geraldine Provence

In the Crescent City/Houston County Jail, Mittie Jensen -- grey-haired, stodgy, child-like -- hid her face in her apron on being escorted into the darkened cell. Unaware they stared at her, Mittie hunched over and held the garment in place with both hands. Her astonishment had been instant and electric on seeing Hazel, Constance, Diedre, Magdelena and Coral, who had been brought in earlier following a sweep on Ross Wing Boulevard. The painted women in scared hair and howling colors were riveting, fancy strutting birds in a coop.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" asked Constance, the tallest of the prostitutes. "Why not take the apron off your head and be sociable? All that wailing is giving my headache a bad time."

Mittie plopped down on a bench and didn't look up. She needed time to think. She had covered her head out of alarm. Each cell-mate wore a trade image, images which had startled Mittie: Hazel's black leather and swirling hair, Diedre's feather boa and pink hotpants, skin-tight red satin split up the side on Coral, and Constance in a sequined green body suit. Magdalena's velvet black body glowed in tinseled silver lamé.

A hand touched Mittie's shoulder. She felt the bench sway and smelled perfume. "It's o.k.," the tall girl said as she sat down, "Nobody is going to bother you. Come on. Look at me. Tell me why you're here. My name is Constance Bailey, and I've been in and out of here more than I like to think about. Just earning a living. If there wasn't a demand for what we sell, we wouldn't be in here. It makes me mad as hell. Just capitalism at work. Do you need a lawyer?"

Mittie peeped from behind one hand. The apron fell. She felt in her left pocket and took out a clean wadded cloth and rubbed it across her eyes and then held it against her nose, snuffling into the wrinkled fabric. She bunched the rag and jammed it securely in the opposite pocket.

The five women stopped talking. Mittie waited in the sudden quiet. Only Magdalena moved, her jaw rhythmically working a wad of purple gum between gleaming teeth.

"It's o.k.," whispered Constance. "I was scared my first time. I cussed the hypocritical sons of bitches to keep from bawling. It's o.k. Are you in for soliciting?"

Mittie turned "soliciting" over in her head. "No," she said, "it ain't that. I don't hardly know why I'm here, since for forty-five years I've lived as my Daddy before me and his Daddy before him. Making and selling to regulars and setting aside a portion for the law."

A male deputy stopped to listen through the barred divider. Mittie hushed.

In unison the four standing moved forward. Eight hands on eight bars. Four pairs of eyes held the intruder. He reddened, dropped his gaze and keyring. Snatching the keys off the floor, he strode into the office and tripped on the threshold. Examining the floor, and the bottom of each shoe, he swore, "Hot damn!," and ran a forefinger between starched blue collar and flushed Adam's apple.

"What'd they say to you, Charlie?" guffawed the dispatcher.

"Mind your own business."

Mittie went on, "The only lawyer I've known, Giles Stoner, died not two years after my Daddy passed."

"I'll have Lester Smalls take care of you," said Constance. "He'll be along soon. Hazel called him while we were being booked."

Hearing her name, Hazel, backlit red hair ablaze, sat down beside Mittie, stretched her mesh-encased legs straight out and crossed her ankles.

Mittie was aware of the contrast to her own flat canvas shoes, white ankle socks and chubby knees. She leaned in just a bit. Hazel's eyes, big and blue as robins' eggs, and framed by long black lashes, looked back at her. Mittie's look shifted to her shimmering blue glass earrings. They reminded her of sunup.

"What are you doing here?" Hazel asked. "What's your name?"

"I'm Mittie Jensen and I live out in the county near Flood River Bridge. They've locked me up for selling homemade liquor. I'd appreciate meeting your Lawyer Smalls. Always before, the law has been satisfied to have an occasional pint. This new bunch sent this fellar out to my place, acted like I wanted to poison him. He said, 'You're under arrest,' and all that about my rights. Never harmed anyone. Mind my own affairs. Worked out I never made more than I sold. I need to be home seeing to things. Officer asked me when he told me to get in the car did I want to lock up the place. From who, I asked him." Mittie pursed her lips tight to shut off the torrent of words.

Coral, slant-eyed with gold embroidery on her red satin standup collar, stood erect, speaking softly.

"It's the same with us, Mittie," she said.

"Listen up girls, have we forced anybody to buy our favors?"

Chuckles rippled.

Hazel hooted, slapping her leather skirt, "More apt to be the other way around."

"Well, none of us deserves to be locked up," Constance added, "including Mittie. The politicians are making a stir so it looks like they're doing something. As soon as Lester Smalls gets here and posts bail, we'll be out."

◆

"Mr. Smalls," Mittie insisted neighborly after accepting his offer of a ride to her place, "Get out and let me show you my garden and gather you a basket of fresh eggs."

"Now, Miss Jensen, you don't need to do that, but I would like to walk around and stretch my legs before heading back."

"Jensens have lived here for over one hundred years, making liquor and growing vegetables, raising chickens, selling and sharing the extra. Never sold anything not good enough for our own use. Now you take these onions here." Mittie got down on one knee and stirred the worked earth to free the white bulb. Handed it to Smalls.

"It's tender and sweet," Mittie said, explaining the benefits of mulching, while gathering onions in her apron.

"You see those red-feathered chickens?" she pointed. "They're laying fourteen eggs a day. Chicken manure makes good fertilizer. Have to work it in gradual. Too strong used straight. Could burn the plants."

They circled the henhouse, gathering eggs. Fourteen. Smalls took the basket Mittie reached toward him. She cradled an extra large egg in her palm. Smiled a toothsome grin.

"Two yolks," she boasted.

Into a cardboard box alongside the onions and a sack of eggs, Mittie put a jar of pear preserves, and a jar of clear liquid from a row of Mason pint jars in the pantry.

"Miss Jensen, you are a generous lady. Mrs. Smalls will be as pleased as I am to share your bounty."

Touching his hat, he nodded, opened the car door and put his right foot onto the floorboard.

"By the way, Miss Jensen, it would be wise to take the rest of the summer off. Know what I mean? Constance, Hazel and the girls have gone to Orlando, asked me to give you this." He put his hand inside his coat and handed Mittie a sealed white envelope. There was no writing on the outside.

Mittie put the envelope in her apron pocket and waved as Smalls drove off.

She leaned down and picked up the white cat rubbing against her ankles and held him purring atop her stomach, stroked his fur and thought about the trouble that had come to her since Sheriff John Aimes had lost his job. He had been summarily fired by the politicians following consolidation.

The last time she had seen him, she had heard his pickup turn off the paved road that Tuesday. She had, as usual, placed a jar on the crossbeam beside the corner post of the front fence, and was weeding the flower beds, when he rounded the curve. He had slowed to a stop, lifted the jar and held it up admiringly before tipping his cap to Mittie.

Mittie had kept on weeding.

She walked on, stroking the cat, among the brick and bottle-bordered flower beds, where the angled bricks formed toothed ridges and the bottles, necks down and perpendicular, stood in no particular order. The Jensen trade signal--one blue Milk of Magnesia bottle--marked each of the circular beds and collectively made an "X."

Aimes had ridden by on that Tuesday and she had heard on Saturday that he had gone off the Trout River Bridge and drowned in the swollen current. Afterward, he lay on a marble slab at the Shady Grove Mortuary waiting his family's decision whether to bury him in the uniform he'd faithfully worn, and shed in anguish, or put him away in the navy blue gaberdine suit, white shirt and business tie suggested by Jamie Suggs, the undertaker. Mittie felt they should have used the obsolete free uniform, which they could appropriately split up the back.

In the heat of the afternoon, the crown of her white hair showed above the weeds, intermittently visible as she moved toward the cache of pints from the last cooking buried in the hay of the barn. Her Daddy had kept his horse and buggy there. The horse had long since died. The buggy's shay leaned, propped on a section of sycamore trunk.

It was Mittie's custom to make four cookings each year in the scrupulously cleaned stainless steel drums, which glowed under the canopy of dense growth west of the pasture. To the unknowzing eye, it would have appeared the area was undisturbed, a wooded tract with a winding path running through, which started at the dooryard, circled the chickenhouse, meandered through the woods to the creek and back again -- a simple weathered country house and an ageless path to nowhere in particular and everywhere in general, used by four generations of Jensens.

The cracked leather seats were brittle to her touch, the springed supports well oiled and rust free. A nesting Rhode Island Red hen occupied the rear of the buggy and watched from the shadows as Mittie loaded the jars into the wheelbarrow.

◆

The chinaberry's shadow at the edge of the porch set the time at one hour past noon the next day, when Mittie heard the quiet hum of a car motor and the snapping of twigs under the tires. She lay in the swing on the small back porch. Squawk. Squawk. The chains marked its movement.

The front gate opened and clanked shut. Hard soles clicked on the bricked walkway, followed by hollow echoes on the planked porch. She waited for the knock on the screendoor before lifting her head from the faded blue and white striped ticking of the feather pillow.

Mittie opened the back screen and let it slam silently against the rubber tire strip nailed in the jamb. Her shoes made no sound as she walked down the front hall.

"Howdy," Mittie spoke, startling the badged uniformed presence.

She had wondered who would replace Sheriff Aimes after reading the article linking his drowning to "illicit liquor in two Mason pint jars," which had floated to the surface in Trout River. The water had hidden Aimes and the truck. The satchel containing the jars had surfaced -- like a balloon.

Officer Grimes handed Mittie an envelope, touched his right hand to the wide brimmed hat shading his sun-glasses, said "Ma'am," and galloped down the steps to the official vehicle sparkling outside the fence, motor running.

"You are hereby ordered to appear in the Superior Court of Houston County, Alabama, at 9:00 a.m. on the sixth day of June 1951 ...." Mittie carefully replaced the typed sheet, laid the envelope on the kitchen table beside the smaller one, which Smalls had given her, and sat down to think.

Shade had extended past the porch, merged with the shadow of the house and crossed the side yard into the open space outside the fence, when Mittie stirred. Out front, the white sandy lane was banded by the last narrowed strip of sunlight before nightfall.

At sunrise, Mittie stood at the corner of the house and watched blue fire glow in the Milk of Magnesia bottles, before pulling them from the circles and laying them gently in the wheelbarrow.

Under the shed beside the barn, she added a hammer, pliers, shovel, hoe, and hacksaw to the load on the wheelbarrow and took two burlap sacks off the nails where they hung between chores.

It took Mittie most of the morning to dismantle the still and move it aside to get where the metal plates were supposed to cover the hole, the hole which she had never seen uncovered and only knew about from one of her Daddy's last in a series of talks giving instructions about the place. Mittie had known much from observation. The hole had been news.

Mittie put the tubing and concrete blocks inside the drums, which she had set well to the side, and placed the edge of the spoon-shaped spade at what she determined to be just clear of the metal plates and pushed the clean sharp edge into the packed soil. She thought of the many Jensens who had walked around on the undisturbed ground, especially her Daddy.

She lifted the clodded earth and set it aside, careful to fix in her mind where she put it. She remembered to follow his directions exactly -- "Spade a long straight furrow and move over to make another in the shape of a rectangle, eight feet long by four feet wide." She planned to put the dirt back exactly as she had found it.

Resting, Mittie sat in the wheelbarrow. She noticed the sunlit trees' patterning shade and the answered call of a loon. She liked the smell of the turned, pungent earth and sang tunelessly, "You, you, lie in my heart ... Ya, ya, ya, ya!" Alert, she caught the whine of a motor before seeing the airplane circling on the horizon.

She spread the burlap bags over the partially shaded drums and moved the wheelbarrow into deeper shade. When the plane's motor died away, Mittie stepped inside the outlining furrow to excavate the hole, clod by clod.

She wiped the moisture from her forehead with a rag from the left pocket of her apron and polished her wire-rim glasses in the folds of moist fabric before wadding the rag into a ball and placing it in the opposite pocket.

During the heat of the day, Mittie went back to the house and rested on the back porch swing after her mid-day meal, before returning to the clearing.

She filled in the hole and covered the traces of her digging, and thought of the date marked on the calendar in the kitchen

(June 6, 1951), which was the next morning. That evening, she wound the alarm clock and set the time for 6:30 a.m.

◆

She walked out to the paved road and flagged down the red, white and silver Trailways bus heading east to Crescent City at 7:30 that Tuesday morning. In town, before walking the three blocks to the Court House, she spent a few minutes at the ticket window and rented a locker, in which she stored the two boxes tied with heavy cord (one medium sized and a shoe box). The lingering musky smell from the shoe box was still about her, but fainter after Mittie shut the door, locked it and made the key safe in her pocket with a safety pin.

In the courthouse, Lawyer Smalls greeted her quietly and showed her where to sit. She didn't look around. Just sat. Waiting patiently. She went forward when the judge called her name and she placed her right hand on the Bible. She heard the words clearly and spoke them back: "I, Mittie Jensen, do solemnly swear ..."

The judge said, "Do you manufacture liquor on your place?"

"No," Mittie answered.

"You don't? It says here that you are charged with the manufacture and sale of liquor."

"I did," she said. " Now I don't."

The judge lectured Mittie, slammed the gavel and mouthed, "One thousand dollars or six months to serve." He watched for Mittie's reaction over half glasses.

She paid the fine, laying ten one hundred dollar bills out on the counter. The clerk recounted the bills, feeling the paper and rubbing his thumb over the print. Mittie noticed his nostrils quiver and waited for him to say something, but he didn't.

The bus was nearer full than it had been that morning. Mittie sat by the window, scooted back on the seat and smoothed her dress over her knees. Her feet did not touch the floor, but stuck out a little. She counted the mile markers along the highway until the windows turned to darkening mirrors at sundown.

She felt in her sweater pocket -- beneath the wadded up cloth -- and held the envelope in her hand, feeling the shape. Mittie's heart beat faster and she heard the tires singing against the pavement. She smiled to herself and thought back to that afternoon, when she had removed the three cans from the hole and had set them aside, while storing all the parts of the still, unsold pint jars of liquor, and the blue-fire bottles in the hole. With the bottles gone, folks would know. And there had been the one incident with the neighbor's boy and the slingshot.

She had opened all three cans before examining the contents of any -- paper money tied with string and an assortment of silver and gold coins. She had counted the folding money and coins from one can ($1,685.23) before replacing the remaining two back into the hole.

Mittie took the small envelope out of her pocket. She opened the flap and slipped out the picture. Five bathing-suited girls smiled up at her from beside a swimming pool. There were palm trees. She remembered Hazel's cobalt blue earrings, miniatures of the Milk of Magnesia bottles catching the first rays of sun peeping above the treeline near Trout River Bridge. She turned the card over and read again the slanted cursive writing.

The headlights of the red, white and silver Trailways bus flashed onto a painted sign set well back from the road: "Welcome to the Sunshine State."

Serenity

gelatin silver print

Hope A. Lyon

Things Are Looking Up

Linda Oliverio

Looking up, Willard saw blue sky blazing into the shop window through the crack between the roof of the garage and the roof of the house. The faded green house, sitting slightly to the left of the center line of Highway 441, was the first Florida residence for Willard, Virginia, and their four children still at home (there were eight children total). It was also free food and lodging for thousands of biting fleas and creeping cockroaches. August heat, cooking the parched yard enclosing three sides of the house, encouraged the sandspurs until they were fattened and flourishing in the barren sandy soil.

Willard's radiator shop, in the detached garage, sweltered with heat as he pulled a radiator up and out of a boiling vat of acid with a hook and pulley. Business was starting out slow, but Mama was planning to take in kids during the day and he would save every penny he could scrape up for a new house. Renting was only temporary, especially this place; he couldn't grow mud in this soil. Selling his house in Ohio had brought in almost enough for a down payment, but Mama would have to wait a few months longer for that house. He'd get it; it just wasn't going to be easy.

The first month in Florida was proving that the Garden of Eden of his dreams was still inhabited by snakes. Willard awoke on his seventh day in St. Cloud to an empty carport. He guessed that his was the easiest car to steal in the whole town, saying, "Take me, I'm yours," sitting right on the highway with the keys left in the ignition by Martha.

The theft, under investigation, had created a problem for the family -- transportation. He had to dip into the down payment fund to replace the car, which didn't look like it would ever be recovered, with an old green pickup he had found cheap. Since the truck blended in with the color of the house and Martha couldn't drive a stick, maybe it had a chance. He looked at the clock on the counter top and reached over to pull the string on the fan and flip the lights off. Laying his heavy gloves in their place on the counter, he went into the house to get Mama. They were going to the hospital to get Mary.

Transportation, the entire focus the week before, had become unimportant, except as a way to the hospital when his daughter Mary had almost died of a ruptured appendix. That Dr. Jewel was a snake; he had seen Mary the very morning her appendix ruptured and had sent her home to lie on the couch, sweating, moaning, and tossing with pain. Her fever blazing, her pain unbearable to witness, he and Mama had wrapped her in a blanket and rushed her to the hospital in Kissimmee. That bumpy fifteen miles in the old green truck, packed into the front seat, was the longest twenty-five minutes of his life. Mama's arms wrapped tightly around Mary couldn't keep her from jostling around, moaning in agony. Even the thought of losing Mary, dependable, hard-working Mary who sometimes got lost in the shuffle of all his kids, was enough to make his heart pound fiercely and his stomache ache. Upon arrival at Community Hospital, they checked her in immediately to emergency surgery, and now two weeks later, she was coming home. There went the rest of that down payment. He'd just have to start over, and pinch that brown penny smashed between his thumb and forefinger that much harder; his fingers were already whitening from the pressure.

* * *

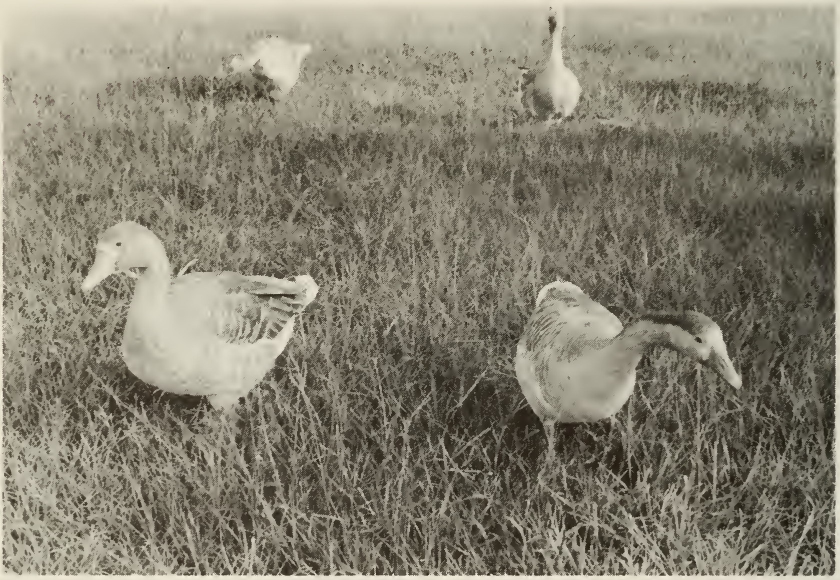
Evening began to fall on the matching house and truck; sandspurs were beginning to nod off to sleep. Willard, breathing in the hot shop air and letting it out slowly, thought of Mary at home now, resting peacefully in the front bedroom; she was going to be all right, and he had two lawn mowers to fix and a radiator core to replace tomorrow. He pulled the string on the fan and turned out the light. Looking up, Willard saw stars popping out in a darkening sky that glowed through the crack between the roof of the garage and the roof of the house. Walking carefully through the shadows of the shop to the door, he went outside and walked around the house to the front porch.

A shrill scream cut through the thick night air. Mama, running down the steps, flying into Willard's arms, panted and spewed out barely distinguishable words. They wildly tumbled out of her mouth, "There's a *sss* snake by the front door of the house!" She finally got them all out.

"Dear God," Willard prayed as he ran back into the garage, flipping on the lights and finding his axe. "Did I do the right thing by bringing my family to Florida?" Then, grabbing the long handled axe, he mounted the front steps to the porch in a single bound, and swinging wildly, chopped and smashed the harmless rat snake into pocket-sized pieces. Martha, Willie, and Linda, running outside at the sound of the ruckus, stood on the porch with Mama, watching the scene with fascinated horror.

Mary, from the open window of the front bedroom, yelled out in a strong voice, "What's going on out there?"

Everyone, turning away from the squashed horror to the sound of Mary's voice, looked up from the mess of mangled serpent and splintered wood on the floor and gazed toward the bedroom window -- captivated by the voice of recovery.



Quest

gelatin silver print

Karen Ashley

happiest girl

these dreams of prickly sweet golden
lush cool green and nightmare water
wrap me up and smell of childhood
and summer where
armfuls of neptune daisies
feed on my strawberry sun
and tiny spider fairies
twirl and dance on blue silver glass

come play with me in my memories
faraway picnics in sun breezy fields
tumbled up dreams of neon winter hands
and sepia-drenched days of sticky hot

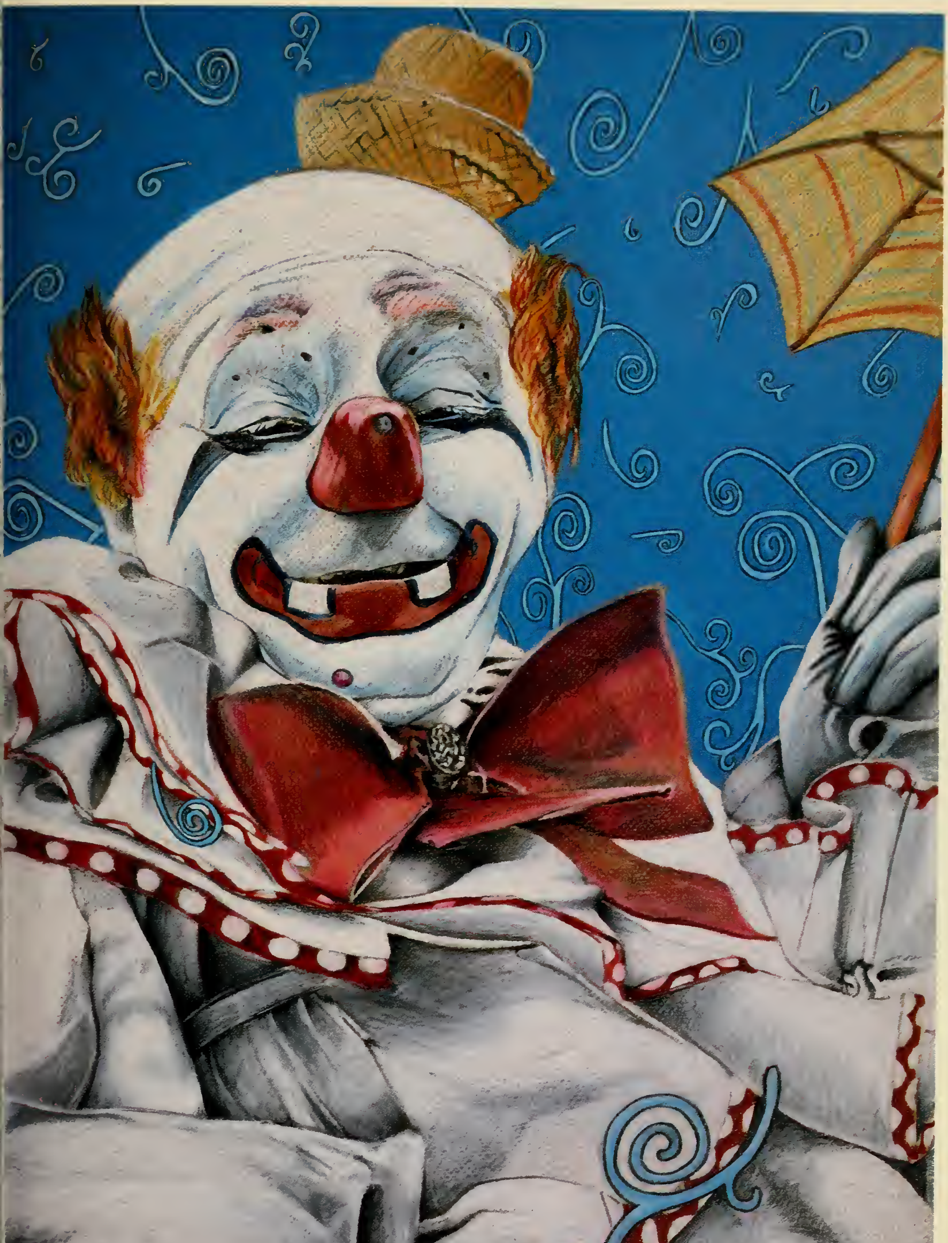
come swim with me in my innocence
dance and shake all glitter wet flowers
vanish deep in summer soft water
swallowed up whole and silent

Elizabeth Harvey

Calendar

Christmas, under the tree, a small red box,
February, for me, a Valentine.
Still, St. Patrick's Day brought me no shamrocks.
You April Fool! That diamond ring was mine.
"Can I love you forever?" "Yes, you May."
Then by glorious June the sun was out.
July was hot . . . we had nothing to say.
Then August's passion: all I did was shout.
By September, things had cooled off a bit.
I, the witch on Halloween, wore no ring.
Thanksgiving it was he who had a fit.
Winter caroling but we did not sing.
By New Year's Eve, it was really over.
I go on searching for my four-leaf clover.

Susan Alexis Tucker



Clown
colored pencil
Shawn Kelshaw

Jonah and The Fates

Kimberly Kent

Jonah had driven home from work happy and humming. He jumped from his car and he skipped to his doorway. He opened the screen door, got out his keys, then remembering it was Friday, put them back in his pocket and opened his unlocked front door. Melba Jane would be inside, he realized. Fridays were the day that his girlfriend came over and cooked for him. It was a tradition that had begun over two years ago, only a few weeks after they had started dating.

"Melba Jane!" Jonah shouted as he walked inside to the living room of the small suburban house. He had never really liked his house. It had been an impulsive purchase right after college to assert his status as an adult. The house was dark and had an irrepressible smell of mildew that no amount of cleaning could eliminate. "Melba! Where are you?" Jonah called.

Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos were weaving rather abysmal color into their tapestry. The thread was greyish in tone, with fecal brown tints that shone in the sun. Clotho, the youngest and most beautiful of the Fates, sighed deeply, wishing to work with brighter colors. She fondly remembered the 1980's, the fluorescent hues of hot pink and neon yellow that permeated the spindle on which she helped create destiny. She wondered why today could not be like that and looked piteously at Atropos.

"What do you want now?" Atropos demanded with a sneer.

"I want fun!" Clotho whined, throwing down the thread with which she had been working. "We haven't gotten to do anything exciting since '88 or '89. It's all been work-work-work since then! What happened to all the money, all the power, the sex, the drugs? I want it back!"

From the right of the living room, out of the kitchen, came a small woman with straight, almost spiky, medium brown hair. She looked to be about thirty, but with her lack of height and weight she could easily have passed for twelve. She wore old jeans, a pink T-shirt, and an apron that said "Kiss the Cook" in raised black letters across the torso. Her face was red, and she wiped some flour from her nose before she replied.

"What is it, honey?" she asked.

"Sit down," Jonah said leading her to his lazy boy recliner. She sat, and he sighed. He ran his right hand through his already thinning hair before he spoke. "I had a meeting with my boss, Mr. Gibb, today. You remember him? You met him at that company picnic last year?" Melba Jane nodded, and Jonah continued. "Well, today he called me into his office -- offered me a drink and everything -- and told me that the company is going to be hiring for an executive level position, and he's recommending me for the job!"

"You're kidding!" Melba

Atropos scolded her youngest colleague, "You know it cannot be like that again for a very long time. It's like Athens after the Peloponnesian Wars -- no one is taking any chances. We'll plod through this, just like we've plodded through all the grey and brown periods of time, and someday we will see a flash of blue or green. Until then, stop whining!"

Lachesis, who had been listening to the conversation, now looked up from her measuring rod and spoke. "Atropos," she said tentatively. "I agree with Clotho. Let's just do something -- it can be something small -- to raise our failing spirits."

At this Atropos sighed. She hated when the two of them ganged up on her. They made her feel old, incapable of having fun, like she was their mother or some such nonsense.

"All right," she said grudgingly. "Fine. Let's do what we always do when you two get in this sort of mood. Find me a human -- a *shmuck* as the Hebrews say -- who is dumb enough to believe that he has power over his own life, who thinks he can hazard

Jane shouted, jumping up and hugging her boyfriend. "That's so great! That will mean more money so then we can..." Melba Jane bit her lip to keep herself from saying more.

"Go ahead and say it!" Jonah declared, picking her up off the ground. "Then we can get married! We can buy a new house, a good one, have a honeymoon -- everything. I almost can't believe this is happening!"

"Well, wait a second," Melba replied. Her voice had lost much of its former enthusiasm. "Call me superstitious, but I don't want you to jump to any conclusions. You might not get the job."

"Don't be silly," Jonah said. "Mr. Gibb said they'll hire me, so they'll hire me. In fact, I'm so sure of this, we're going to spend the weekend finding you the most beautiful engagement ring in the world."

Melba sighed. Jonah, who had not put her down, tenderly carried her into the bedroom, and for the first time in over two years, Melba Jane did not finish preparing the dinner she had started for her boyfriend.

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even the most basic of assumptions. And then, then we will crush him."

The weekend went by quickly. Jonah, who normally hated shopping, found himself running to thirteen different jewelry stores looking for the perfect engagement ring. Melba said that she wanted something small but perfect --colorful and bright. Jonah commented that she had described herself to a tee.

Nevertheless, by Monday morning Jonah was happy to get back to work. When he finally signed the credit card slip at the thirteenth jewelry store, he realized just how much money this wedding would cost him. Melba's parents belonged to a midwestern religious cult that did not believe in ceremonies declaring love; they would not help pay for the wedding at all. Jonah needed to feel the security of his office building, the exhilaration of getting his memo from upstairs saying, "Here's your key to the executive washroom and expect to see an increase in your next paycheck." He needed to be reminded that he could pay for the woman he loved.

When Jonah sat down at his desk at nine o'clock Monday morning, there was a memo on

Atropos stared at the tapestry for a great length of time. Although Clotho and Lachesis knew they would never be able to see what Atropos could, they felt the need to be with her, to use their presence as incentive. Atropos, however, took so very long in searching for just the right thread that she made even her colleagues uncomfortable. By the time Atropos exclaimed, "Aha!" Clotho was clandestinely crossing her eyes at Lachesis in a puerile expression of boredom. Lachesis was shaking her head and frowning in response.

"Did you find one?" Clotho asked eagerly, straightening up. "Did you?"

Atropos smiled and pointed to a miniscule thread in the tapestry. Not one of them remembered when it had been woven in, nor would any of them have noticed if a thief came along and stole it. It was, most sincerely, a thread of no importance.

"Look," said Atropos. "You see how this thread starts in a deep grey color then it stupidly has that band of white -- almost impossible to see with the it, it was from Mr. Gibb, but it said simply that Jonah was to go to Mr. Gibb's office the second he got into work.

Jonah rode the elevator upstairs thinking that the executives wanted to congratulate him in person. When he gave his name to the secretary in front of Mr.Gibb's office, she let him in immediately, adding to his belief that he was about to receive a more powerful position.

"Hello, Mr. Gibb," Jonah said extending his hand for a hearty shake. "Did you have a good weekend?"

"Sit down, Jonah," Mr. Gibb answered. The look on his face was worrisome. The wrinkles around his late middle-aged eyes seemed to increase and he downed the shot of bourbon he had been holding in his left hand. "There's no easy way for me to say this, so I'll just tell you. You know that I wanted you for that job. I know what kind of effort you've given to this company, how many years you've worked here, but Jonah, the boys upstairs..." At this he paused and shook his head. "The boys upstairs have been getting flack from some of those liberal factions that have been running the country of late. You know naked eye, but there nonetheless?"

Clotho and Lachesis nodded. This was what they had been waiting for.

"Clotho," asked Atropos, taking the tone of a schoolteacher. "Do you know what that white band means?"

Clotho sighed. She had been working this job for eons, and it was not as if this thread was the first human whose life they had destroyed, but she knew better than to sound off at Atropos. "It means," she replied. "That this silly human dared to doubt our powers, thereby giving us the right to control his fate, even after his thread is supposed to have been finished, his fate already decided."

"Good," said Atropos. "Now, do you see how after the white band, the thread is no longer grey as it was before, but modifies into a plum and finally into a deep mauve?"

The younger Fates nodded. They knew the meanings of the colors but also knew that Atropos would feel the need to lecture them again.

"The grey symbolizes the lack of excitement, happiness, the type of people I'm talking about?"

Jonah realized that he was supposed to furnish some sort of response, but all he could manage was a gulp and a nod of his head.

"Good, good," continued Mr. Gibb. "So you understand what we're up against. As I said, you know that I wanted you, I really fought for you, but we had to give the job to someone else. A woman. A black woman. Who uses a wheelchair. The boys tell me that we can use her as three different types of minorities. Hell, if she were gay, we'd never have to hire another one like her again. Ha ha."

Jonah managed a small smile. He had not heard a word after Mr. Gibb said that they had given the job to someone else but realized that he was going to need to figure out something if he was going to be getting married. After all, there was the price of the ring, the dress, the new house...

"Shit," Jonah said out loud. "My girlfriend -- I just bought her an engagement ring. She's out today shopping for a wedding dress. We were counting on this promotion. and adventure in his early life. The plum and mauve signify that he becomes happy, feels his life is a success. What is most unfortunate for this man, however, is that coincidentally his life becomes better after he dares to challenge us. It is this detail in chronology that allows us, by Cosmic Rule, to destroy him how we see fit."

All three Fates cackled.

Atropos continued, "The only question is, how would we like to destroy his life?"

Clotho spoke up, "Let's cut the thread right where the white band is -- kill him immediately!"

"Is that really what you want to do? How mundane," said Atropos. "I think I have a much better idea." She affected a suspenseful aura around herself, waiting for her younger companions to beg her response.

"What?" they asked. "What can we do?"

Atropos allowed herself a long pause before answering. "Last week when I had dinner at the Muses', I brought back this small jar of black paint. I say we let the human live, but if he thought his life was bad as

How am I going to pay for all this?"

"Jonah," said Mr. Gibb, sounding sincerely sympathetic. "I really don't know."

"Well," Jonah said standing, getting ready to walk back down to his cubicle and return to work. "Well," he continued. "I'm sure you did everything you could, and I've just got to make the best of this." Jonah then held out his hand for Mr. Gibb to shake.

"Wait," Mr. Gibb said. "I'm afraid I have more to tell you."

Jonah walked back to the chair and sat down again. "Yes?" he asked.

Mr. Gibb poured himself another shot of bourbon and chuckled nervously. "And I thought I had a hard time telling you that you didn't get the promotion," he mumbled.

Jonah sat silently, staring at his boss. "Well, Jonah," said Mr. Gibb. "I was so sure that you would be getting this promotion that I hired somebody for what was supposed to be your old job. Of course, normally I would just call this guy up and tell him I'm sorry but the position is no longer available. The thing is though that this guy is a catch--just out of Harvard, top of his class, our company will be lucky to get a grey thread, let him see how he likes it as a black one."

Using only the very tips of the long, pointy fingernails of her left hand, Atropos picked the thread out of the tapestry and carried it to the work table of the Fates. With her right hand she opened the small jar of black paint and dipped the thread, covering the deep mauve and the plum -- covering everything up to the white band.

such a kid. This boy will move quickly up the ladder. You have to understand, I must do what's best for the company. I'm sorry, Jonah."

It was only nine thirty in the morning when Jonah got back from work and walked to the doorway of his dim, little house. After opening the screen door, he realized that his front door was unlocked. "Melba Jane must be inside," he thought. He felt relieved knowing his girlfriend was there, and would still be there, he was sure, even after he told her the horrible news. "The woman is a rock," Jonah said out loud.

He opened the door and was immediately greeted by Melba. "Hello," she said happily, kissing him on the cheek and giving him a small hug. She did not seem to notice the impropriety of Jonah's hour of return, and Jonah saw the reason why.

Sitting on his lazy boy recliner was a woman, short like Melba Jane, thin like Melba Jane, but completely bald and wearing a brown monk's robe. The woman was around fifty-five years of age and was undoubtedly Melba Jane's mother.

"Peace be to you, O brother of the universe," she said to Jonah, grasping his right hand in both of hers.

The Fates watched the small thread hopefully. Although they had no instrument through which they could see the mortal world, they were all extremely sensitive to the small tremors and heaves that indicated how it was progressing. "Watch the tapestry!" Atropos demanded. "And feel the movement of the Earth!"

"Wait!" yelled Lachesis. "I swear I just saw another thread turn color. You see this little one here?" Lachesis pointed to a bit of string that had already been woven intricately into the Fates' work. Its beginning and ending were a crimson hue, but its middle was the greyish brown that overpowered that part of the tapestry.

"It used to be grey until the end," continued Lachesis. "I'm sure it did. It began in that red color, then it turned grey, then it stayed grey."

"Boring, boring grey," Clotho sighed.

"Yes," hissed Atropos. "That's it exactly! Someone who has been involved in this man's life has now gone on to greater deeds. Whoever it is, this person will develop much

"Um, hello, Mrs. Leopold," Jonah answered formally. "It's, uh, nice to finally meet you."

"Oh, please," she said. "Call me Kamelarine, for that is my ashram name. It means, 'the universe is one like a pigeon.'"

"Well, sure Kamelarine." At this point Jonah was staring at Melba Jane, waiting for her to tell him what was going on. When she did not speak, he continued. "I didn't know you were coming. I thought you couldn't leave Buddha's Wide Territory in Indiana."

"And miss my only daughter's wedding?" Kamelarine scoffed. "The hare rama will let me back in, don't you worry about it! He actually has no choice. I stole one of his Cadillacs to get out here."

"Well, that's great," Jonah said absently. "Melba, can I talk to you in the kitchen for a moment?"

Jonah led Melba to the small, dirty kitchen and told her that he did not get his promotion.

"Oh, honey," Melba Jane said. "I'm so sorry. But don't you worry -- we're young, we're in love, we'll make it on your old salary. I'll return the happier than before we dyed the thread."

"Look!" Clotho added. "The thread seems to be getting longer now. Will this person live longer now that the man's life has been changed?"

"Yes," answered Atropos, trying to look peaceful and kind. "By destroying the life of one mortal, we have helped one more deserving."

"And," added Clotho. "We have brought a more brilliant hue to our tapestry also."

The Fates cooed at each other. They knew that they had done well.

ring -- we'll get one that's smaller and less perfect."

Jonah went to his liquor cabinet and, like Mr. Gibb in his former company, poured himself a bourbon before speaking. "Melba, I knew you'd still be here for me, through the good and the bad. I want you to know how much that means to me, but there's more I need to tell you," he said after taking his drink.

Melba stared up at him with an odd look of unwitting hope in her eyes.

Jonah spoke very quickly and very quietly. "Mr. Gibb was so sure I would get the new job that he gave my old job to someone else. It seems that not only am I not an executive, I am also unemployed. I'm sorry, honey," Jonah continued. "But I think we're going to have to call off the wedding -- at least for right now. There's just no way I can get married when I don't know what's happening in the rest of my life. I still love you, I still want to be with you, but--"

"But what?" Melba's face had changed. She could no longer pass for a pre-pubescent girl. All thirty of her well-lived years came rushing to her face, and Jonah backed away from the rage he saw coming. “My mother is here! Do you know I haven’t seen her since I left the ashram when I was nineteen? She came all the way out here to see us get married, and you’re fired? You’re not going to marry me? You asshole! You son of a bitch!”

Melba Jane kneed Jonah strategically and left him standing there hunched over and moaning. She then grabbed her mother and stormed out of her ex-fiancé’s house.

Jonah had been sitting in his living room, in his lazy boy recliner, drinking from his bottle of bourbon for about two hours when the doorbell rang.

He got up to answer the door, and fell backwards onto his derriere when he saw what was there.

“Peace be to you, O brother of the universe,” said his guest. She was short and thin and could, once again, have passed for twelve. She was also bald and wearing a robe much like the one Jonah had seen her mother wearing earlier in the day. She told Jonah that she would not walk into his heretical house and asked him if he would stand outside and speak to her for a moment.

“Sure, Melba,” Jonah said agreeably, offering her a drink.

"I’ve decided to return to the ashram,” Melba explained, shaking her head at the bottle. “I don’t know why I thought I could be happy marrying an infidel. I have decided to become one with the son of the hare rama of Buddha’s Wide Territory in Indiana. Don’t ever try to contact me or you will incur the wrath of my holy significant other.” And so saying, Melba Jane turned

Atropos spoke to Clotho in a manner that, while slightly patronizing, also allowed for a hint of genuine amusement. “Well,” she asked the youngest Fate. “Did you enjoy yourself? Was this enough...*fun*...for you?”

“Yes,” Clotho answered, very self-satisfied.

“Good,” replied Atropos. “Now maybe we can get back to work.”

Clotho nodded and immediately went back to her spindle. She might not have been the most stalwart Fate in the world, but she was a good, strong worker.

Atropos smiled at her youngest colleague, and feeling that once again everything was in its place, she too started back at the eternal job on hand.

Only Lachesis remained idle. Something did not feel quite right to her.

“Wait!” she called. Don't we have to put the thread back in the tapestry?"

Clotho and Atropos put down their tools. "I forgot," mumbled the oldest Fate. "Who cares?" muttered the youngest.

"Well," Lachesis responded. "If you two want to work, I'll sharply around, walked back to her car, and drove away.

"Well," thought Jonah. "I don't know what to think about any of this." He started to lurch drunkenly towards his house and was once again appalled at its ugliness, how light seemed to bend around it, avoiding his entire dwelling place. He stopped moving and took another swig of bourbon.

"You know," said Jonah, now talking to himself out loud. "I should pass out. Right on my front lawn. It's the only place on my property that gets any sun. Always gets the sun right here, always green and healthy where I never get to sit in my lazy boy. House is built in the wrong spot. But I think I wanna sit down anyway."

Jonah looked down and was reminded that he was not the only living creature in his neighborhood who appreciated his front lawn. "Damn dog!" he shouted turning toward the house on the left of his. "Overfed, overshitting Saint Bernard."

Jonah drank more.

"Nothing goes right," he continued. "I hate this house! I hate my life. I think...I think I'd put the thread back in. Just tell me where it is."

"Isn't it on the work table?" Atropos asked, still concentrating on her cutting.

"I don't see it," Lachesis replied slowly, looking all over the area. "I see the jar of paint and last Sunday's comics, but I don't see the thread."

"Then it's probably on the floor," answered Clotho impatiently.

Lachesis got on her knees and searched the floor around the table. "I still don't see it," she declared.

Clotho sighed heavily, threw down the section of the tapestry on which she was now stitching, and stomped over to the work table. "If you want something done right..." she mumbled to herself.

Now both Clotho and Lachesis were wandering around the floor on their hands and knees. After a few minutes Lachesis sat up. "Clotho," she said. "I can't find it. I don't think it's here."

Clotho sighed, blowing a strand of hair away from her face. "Uh oh," she replied.

"Um, Atropos," she then called. "Could we, uh, talk to you for a second. It seems we like to burn this whole place to the ground. Maybe the dog will come over too. I think that it's time to die."

Jonah entered his house and stood in the middle of his living room. He dropped the bottle of bourbon on the floor and walked into the kitchen. "All these people promising things and not coming through." Jonah's voice had lowered and slowed to a deep slur. "Time for me to do something that nobody can stop. Time to..."

Jonah looked bemusedly around his kitchen. "Time to..." he repeated. His eyes fixed on his stove, an old-fashioned gas range with an old-fashioned gas oven. It had been white when it was made -- sometime in the 1950's. Now it seemed a dull grey color. There was a pull-down-opening at the very bottom, in which the pilot light sat. "Time to blow out the goddamn pilot light and set the place on fire. Get rid of the house, end my miserable life."

Jonah felt better now that he had decided on a plan of action.

He tried to drop himself carefully to the floor but instead fell with an inebriated thud. "Shit," he said, deciding that he had bruised his right arm.

have a teensy-weensy problem."

Atropos was never a happy Fate to interrupt while she was working. More than once in the history of time had Clotho and Lachesis dealt with a serious emergency alone rather than bother their oldest colleague. It wasn't so much the fact that she became verbally nasty (which she did), but that she was brandishing those rather sharp scissors with which she cut the humans' threads, and Clotho still had a scar on her right cheek from bothering Atropos about something the oldest Fate had deemed trifling.

"What!" shrieked Atropos in response to the summons. Then, "Damn. Cut that one too soon because you cretins were bothering me. And humans always get so irritated when they die before their times!"

Atropos looked up from her work, wielded her closed scissors like a knife. "What do you want?"

Clotho and Lachesis quickly stood up and, in unison, backed one step away from Atropos. "Uh," said Clotho. "You tell her. She likes you better."

"Try to choose a painless way to die and look what happens!"

"Just got to blow the pilot light out," Jonah mumbled.

"There," he said squinting, trying to make sure the light was really extinguished.

"Now I just got to get up and go find some matches. I must have some matches somewhere in this house." Jonah stood painfully, his right arm throbbing even through his drunken haze. "Just one match and the house will blow."

Jonah searched through his kitchen cabinets and drawers. "I'm sure I got matches somewhere," he kept mumbling.

Finally, underneath his silverware, he noticed a matchbook, opened it, and was entirely surprised to find that it still possessed matches. "Rah!" Jonah said. "Nothing can stop me now. I want to die. I'm going to die."

Jonah then mumbled a quick prayer to himself, stooped down to the pilot light again, lit a match, and closed his eyes.

Lachesis giggled nervously. "It, uh," she said. "Seems that we've lost the thread we were playing with. You remember? The one we painted black."

"You've lost it?" Atropos asked incredulously. "You've lost a human being? How could you lose a human being?" Atropos walked one step closer to her younger friends, and they, in response, took another step back.

"You must not have looked hard enough," insisted Atropos.

"We looked everywhere," Clotho whined. Lachesis nodded.

Atropos squinted her eyes, employing the same supernatural vision that had enabled her to see the thread when it was in the tapestry. "Oh my gods," she said after scanning the room numerous times. "It's not in here!"

Clotho and Lachesis shook their heads.

"Well, where is it?" Atropos asked as if she really expected an explanation.

"We don't know," Clotho whimpered in return. "It's just gone!"

"It was bound to happen sometime," Lachesis tried warily. "I mean, you can't work through all eternity without a mishap of some sort, right? And if the thread is really gone there's nothing we can do anyway, is there?"

Atropos stared at her colleagues for a while before answering. "You're absolute morons," she finally said. Then she walked over to Clotho and shoved her in the shoulder. "You were the one who insisted on having fun. You were the one who was bored. Now you can't find the thread--"

"But, Atropos," Lachesis said, cutting her off. She then spoke in her most rational voice. "Let's not worry about placing blame. Let's get to the serious questions. What's going to happen to the human? How is he going to fit in the grand scheme of things if he doesn't exist in the tapestry? Where is he? And, most importantly, are we going to get in trouble for this?"

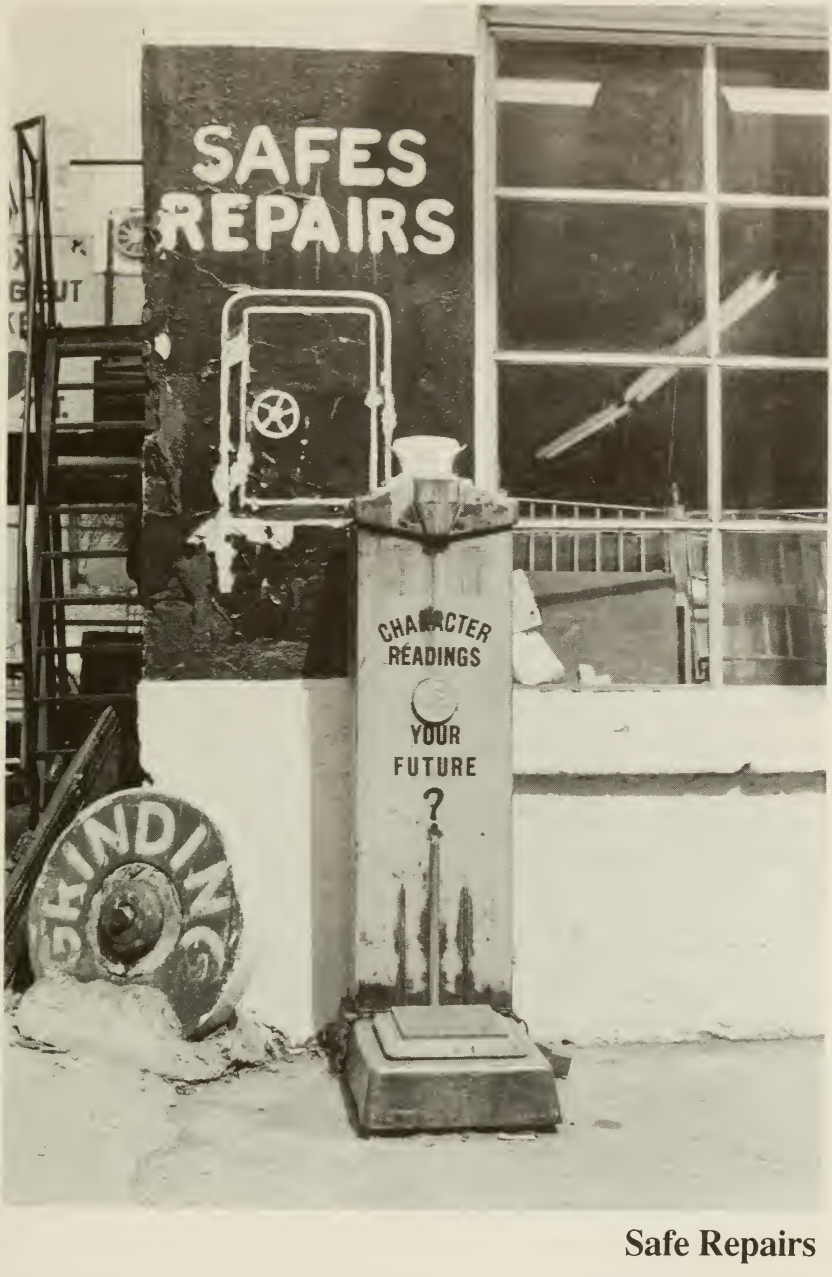
"I don't think we can get in trouble," Clotho said rubbing her now painful shoulder. "We are the Fates. I mean, exactly who is going to do exactly what to us?"

As Clotho spoke, Atropos remained silent but her eyes got wider and wider. “I just thought of something!” she finally screamed. “If we don’t have the thread...if we can’t control the human...he might have...he might have...Free Will!”

“Argh!” Atropos then shouted.

“Argh!” shouted the other two Fates.

The house exploded in a grandiose fashion that Jonah never would have believed possible. Besides the million little pieces of brick, wood, and insulation that covered the sky for a second like fireworks on the Fourth of July, Jonah’s lazy boy flew upwards then landed next door on the neighbor’s Saint Bernard. Jonah himself, however, was around to see none of this for he had become nothing more than a few flecks and stains of carnage displaced chaotically around his lawn.


SAFES
REPAIRS
CHARACTER
READINGS
YOUR
FUTURE
?
GRINDING

Safe Repairs
gelatin silver print
Jennifer Colson

vermin view

energizing aromas enter my crevice
as i conjure
lamb, onion, carrot, tomato, potato
and garlic *soupe du jour*

fire makes the ring red and the pot sweat
as my mammoth defends the grate
faithfully until his mate drives
up in a wheeled crate

my mammoth presses his mate's antennae
into submission
and sets the discs and fiber leaves
about in ritual tradition

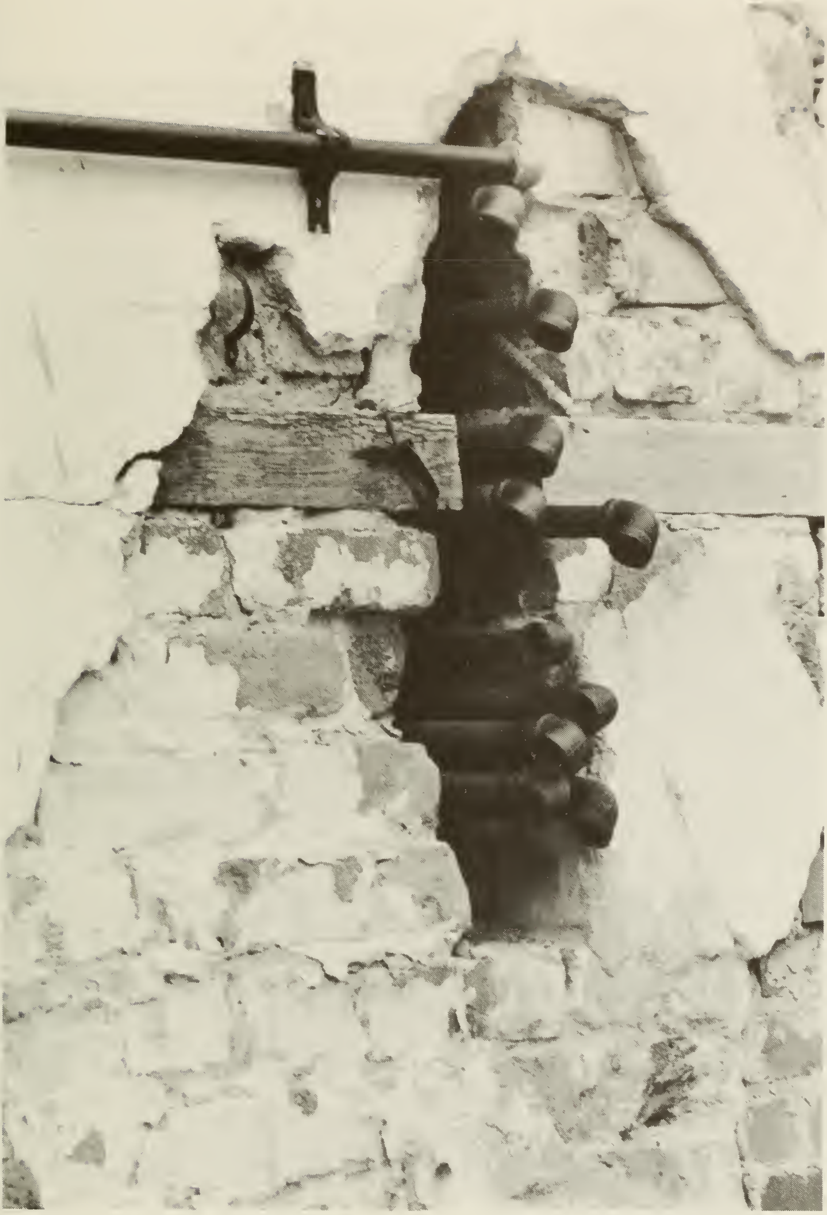
and wields a rigid hand to strew the discs
with libations
both shut their eyes and settle their hands
mouthing vibrations

i scurry into the crumbvault to probe
between sip and sample
while scouting the pristine forest
to inventory my temple

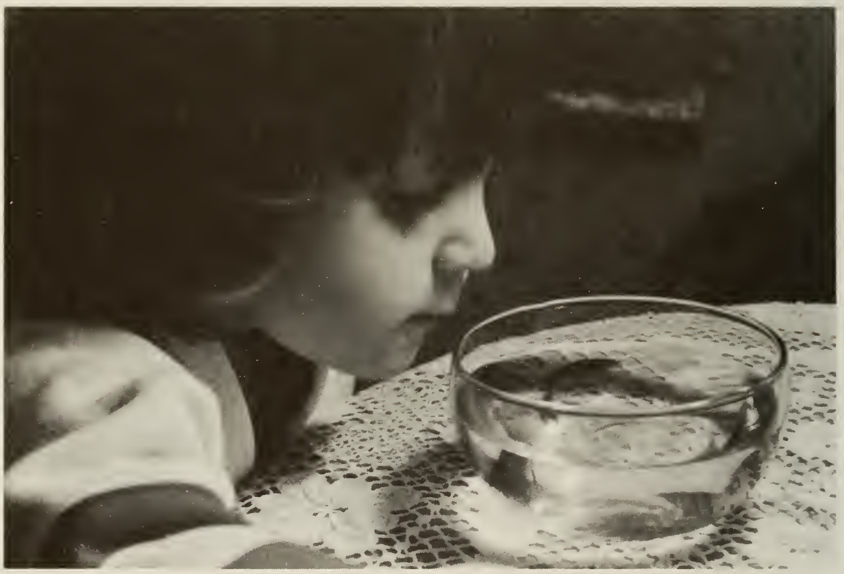
soon i deduce in the shadowy light they are
secreted in their sleep lakes
and will not saunter about on their back legs
before the fireball wakes

too my mammoth is snorting a kazoo
and his mate...is silent

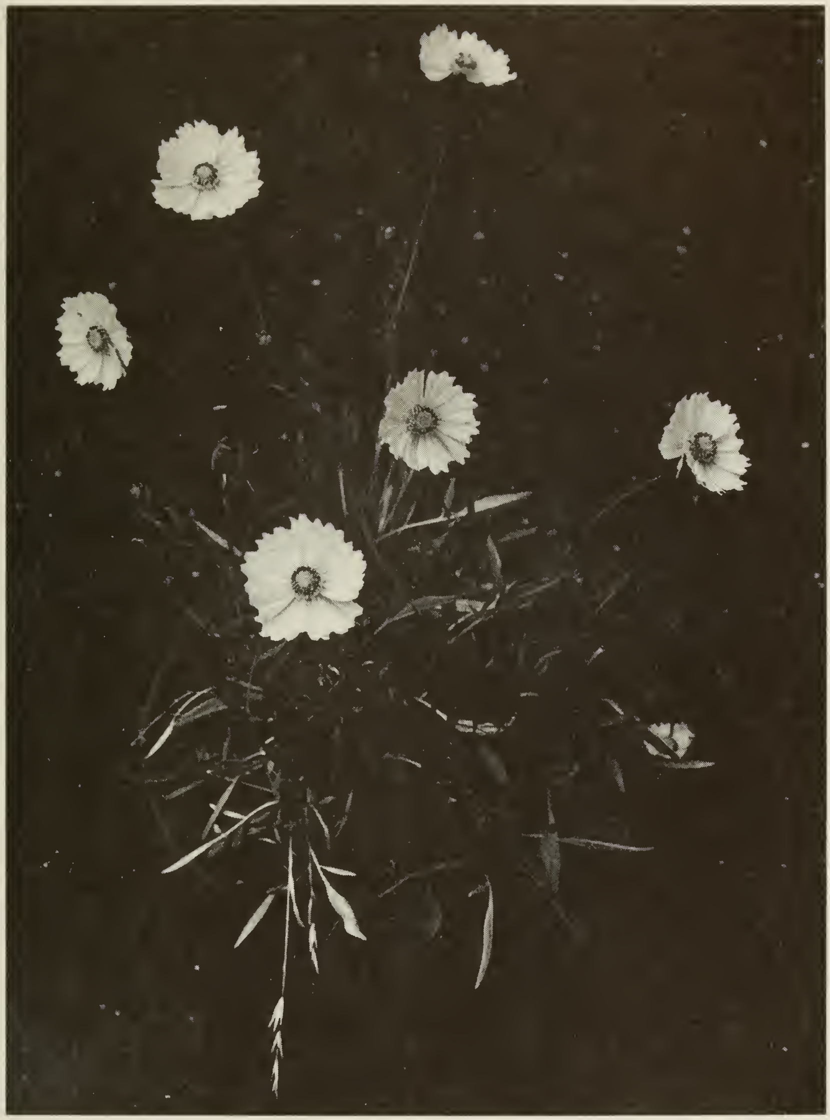
Geraldine Provence



Swans Dancing
gelatin silver print
Stephen Monroe



Age of Wonder
gelatin silver print
Rosemary Bowlin



Coreopsis

gelatin silver print

Wanda Martin

After Fall

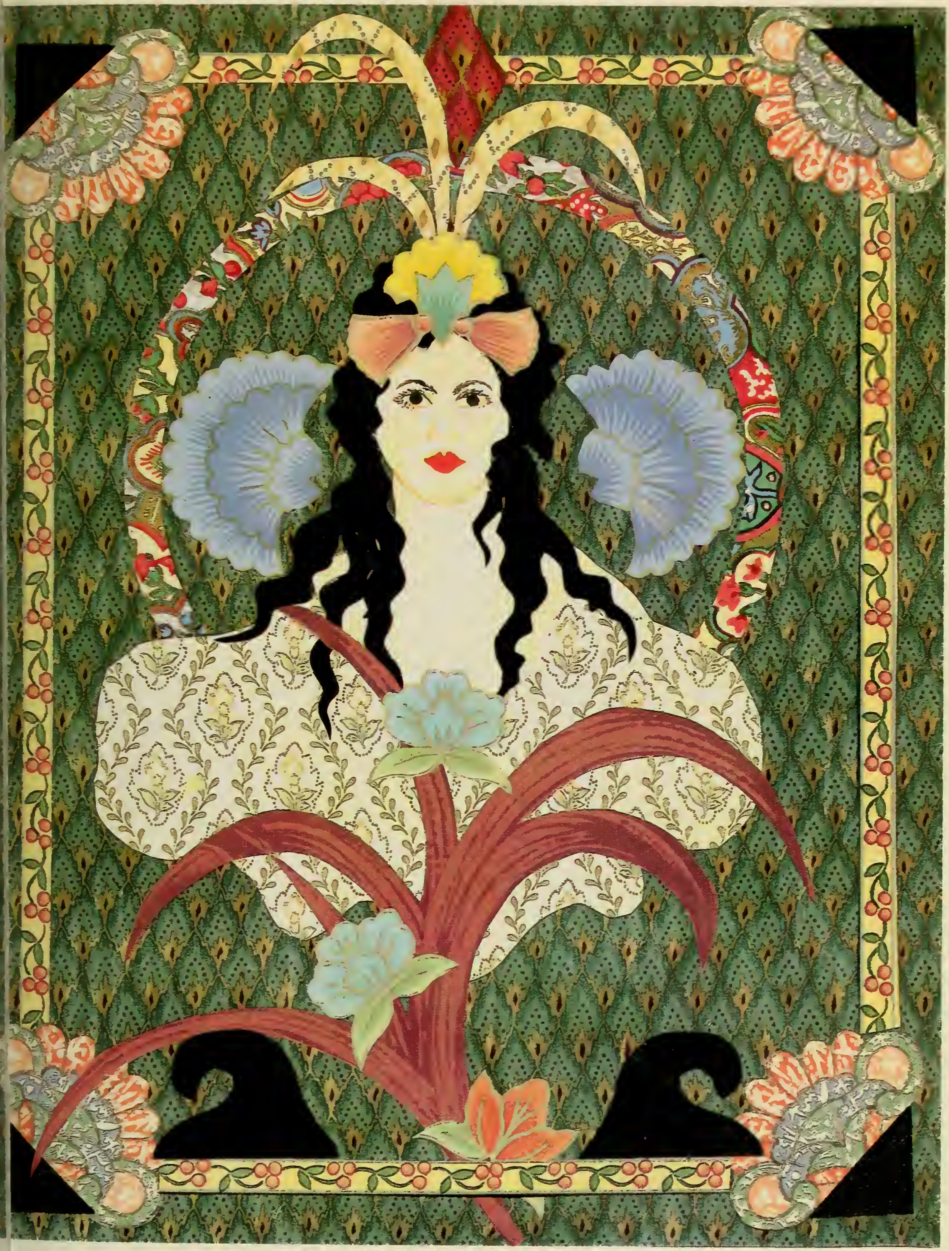
Fall leaves me wanting what we once were
And the tastes of the memories we made linger
In my mouth like Southern Comfort

When I remember

The sweet brown smell of hidden bourbon
At football games where the air made
Our faces look embarrassed,
The oyster roasts on Sunday afternoons,
And the sugary, black Halloween candy
That stuck to our teeth like fillings,
Or that succulent turkey smoked for Thanksgiving,
Then the saltiness of your skin on autumn evenings--

After all, it wasn't a season of sorrow as we watched
Leaves fall only to be raked into a pile.

Susan Alexis Tucker



Nouveau
collage with acrylic
Theresa Anderson

The Story of Marguerite's Mommy

Kimberly Kent

"Mommy," said the little girl tentatively, sneaking a finger of the cookie dough her mother was making. "How did you and Daddy meet?" She sat on a stool in a large, sun-lit kitchen, watching her mother add chocolate chips to an already crowded mixing bowl. She smiled sweetly, sure that her mother had not caught her.

"Well, Marguerite," answered the woman, "that's a wonderful story. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, mommy," answered the little girl bobbing her wavy blonde head up and down.

Her mother pushed the bowl of dough away slightly and leaned back onto a counter behind her. She crossed her arms slowly and turned her eyes toward the ceiling as if trying to recall a distant memory.

"Well, I had just moved to the United States from Russia -- Petersburg, actually, although we called it Leningrad at the time," she began. "We Jews, you know, were very oppressed in Eastern Europe --"

"Marguerite!" shouted a male voice from the living room. The voice travelled over the sound of the television set the man was watching, through the open doorway between the two rooms, and descended into the kitchen with a low grumble.

"Yes, Daddy?" the little girl replied, turning her head towards the voice.

"Is your mother telling you she's a Jew from Russia?"

"Yes, Daddy. Mommy always says that Jews are better than Gentiles and that Jews from Eastern Europe are the best of them all."

The father, undaunted by his daughter's explanation, continued. "She's not even Jewish. She's a *shiksa*. From Cincinnati. I'm the Jew. Hasidic, you know. That's where you got your black hair and black eyes."

"Yes, Daddy. Tell your story, Mommy."

“Well, if your father would not so rudely interrupt, it would be easier. As I was saying, I was in a singles' bar in Richmond, Virginia, one night. I do believe the place was called Mingler’s. It was dark brown and all the seats were covered in that horrible vinyl stuff that tries to pretend it's leather. There were a few neon signs depicting brand names of various beers, and a couple of people were doing shooters on the other side of the bar where I was sitting. The whole place smelled of cheap perfume bought at Walmart. I was watching a small television in the corner -- professional ice-skating was on, and you know how I love professional ice-skating.

"Unexpectedly, the door to the bar opened letting in a bright sheath of mid-afternoon yellow sunlight that framed the silhouette of the male stranger about whom this story revolves. His hair was that blue-black color that seems to be found only on East Asians and Black Irish. His eyes, however, were brown and wide, defying the possibility that he was either of those ethnicities. He must have been at least six feet tall, and if I remember correctly, he was wearing a black silk Perry Ellis shirt--”

“That was Daddy?” the girl asked in wonder. Her mother had handed her a spoon and a cookie sheet, and she was now keeping her hands busy by scooping up balls of dough and depositing the majority of them on the sheet.

“Of course not, dear,” replied the mother, taking one of the full sheets and placing it in the oven. “Among other incongruities, your father would never wear designer clothes.”

“Marguerite!” returned the voice from the living room. The television was now off and the man did not have to speak quite as loudly.

“Yes, Daddy?”

“Is your mother telling you I would never wear designer clothes?”

“Yes, Daddy. Mommy always says you have no taste in clothing. She says you buy your outfits where most people buy power tools.”

“She’s lying. Everything I own is Giorgio Armani or Joe Boxer.”

“Sure, Daddy. Go on, Mommy.”

"Anyway, at this point in my life I was very beautiful. My chestnut hair flowed in curly waves down my back, my green eyes shone, my breasts were large and firm. I wore a dark blue dress with a deep V-neck collar that showed just the slightest amount of cleavage and one of those side leg slits showing an equal amount of thigh. Not slutty, just tempting. Believe me, darling, I was a catch for any man who might walk in. And don't think I didn't know it either! I played those places like pianos! I would sit on the bar stools, smoke a cigarette, and nonchalantly watch TV, but I always knew what was going on. I knew the second a desirable man walked in the room, and then I would make my move."

"But this man, the one with the black hair and blue eyes, no matter what I looked like that night there was no way I could equal his beauty. And it was for this reason alone that I pulled the best trick out of my hat and made my move. I put out my cigarette, made sure I was showing a fair amount of leg, and walked up to the bar stool where he had just sat down. I figured I would buy him a drink. That usually throws men for a loop, you know. If you act the aggressor. It's a good way to disarm them so you can grab them before anyone else does. Remember that one for when you get older."

Marguerite nodded her head solemnly in response to her mother's advice.

"He was drinking beer -- Budweiser, I remember. Which goes to prove that just because someone is pretty, doesn't mean he has taste. But I didn't even ask what it was he was drinking. I just shot a look at the bartender and flicked my wrist like this. He brought that beer right over. The man was pretty impressed that a woman would pay for his drink. 'What do you do to have all this money to throw around?' he asked in this low voice. 'I'm a spy,' I replied. 'From Paraguay.' Which I was at the time."

"Marguerite," came the call from the living room. The crisp sound of a newspaper's turning pages rattled under the man's grumbling voice.

"Yes, Daddy?" The cookie dough had all been eaten or made into balls and put in the oven. Marguerite had been given a glass of milk, and as she responded to her father's beckoning, she wiped a white mustache away from her upper lip.

"Is your mother telling you that she was a spy from Paraguay?"

"Yes, Daddy. She always says that there is nothing more exciting than Latin American people with sub-automatic weaponry."

"She's lying. I was the spy. From Brazil. I was with the Portuguese Language American Traitors and Offenders, a crack team of philosophers and computer terrorists. I had the guns."

"Yes, Daddy. What were you saying, Mommy?"

"Well, I continued telling this man my story. 'I'm a spy from Paraguay,' I said. 'Here to infiltrate Atlanta and all points South.' Of course, I said this all in Spanish which I spoke fluently at the time, being from South America and all. Unfortunately, since I've become a fugitive living in suburban Maryland, I've been forced to forget my mother tongue. But this man was impressed. I knew it wasn't every day that he was picked up by a beautiful foreign spy.

"So then, Marguerite, do you know what this amazing man that I had just met said to me? He said, 'That's very interesting, Miss, but I think Atlanta is in Georgia, and this is Baton Rouge, Louisiana.' I tell you, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. Honesty is a difficult thing to find in any person, much less a man, and I knew then that it was the one trait I would insist upon for any man with whom I would fall in love.

"Because he had told me the geographic truth in a singles' bar in Savannah, Georgia, I thought he might be willing to help me in my noble mission. I was just about to recruit his services as a spy -- and as a man -- when the strangest looking gentleman you could imagine came up to us.

"Now, as a spy it was part of my training to notice everyone in a room, but I had not noticed this man."

"Marguerite!" shouted the familiar voice from the living room, and Marguerite leaned back on her stool, raising the front two legs off the floor, just enough so that she could see the very tip of her father's head and the back of the recliner in which he was sitting.

"Yes, Daddy?" Marguerite could no longer tell what her father was doing in the living room, and disappointed, carefully leaned forward again, making sure her mother did not notice her somewhat dangerous and definitely reproachable behavior with the stool.

"Is your mother telling you that there was an occasion when she actually did not notice a man walk into a room?"

"Yes, Daddy. But she always says that it's a woman's job to notice all possible suitors in enclosed places. They're easier to catch that way."

"Well, she's right about that. But she's never missed a one. Your mother has a sixth sense about testosterone."

"Yes, Daddy. Keep talking, Mommy."

"Well, this man I did not notice. He was skinny and tall, balding but with slicked back red hair and squinty green eyes, a combination that, once it grabs your attention, makes you wonder how you could ever have missed it. He wore thick glasses with black rims and a grey wool suit that was much too large for his slight frame.

"'Excuse me, sir,' he said to the man to whom I was speaking, 'are you hitting on my wife? Did you know that this is a married woman?' The stranger was obviously upset, very angry, very sad -- almost on the verge of tears. 'Penelope!' he said to me, taking a handkerchief from his breast pocket, 'how could you do this? How could you leave me at home with Marx and Engels then run off to a singles' bar?' 'Marx and Engels?' asked my good looking friend. I, of course, shrugged. I had no idea of whom this stranger was speaking. 'They're our cats!' he wailed, putting his head on my friend's shoulder and crying hysterically.

"Now, Marguerite, I had never seen this man before in my life, not that I was opposed to seeing him at that moment. Nevertheless, I did not know him nor did I know his house nor did I know his cats. I thought he had me confused with some other beautiful woman with black hair and blue eyes. One never knows when a husband will confuse a beautiful stranger for his wife, and I tried to tell him that my name was Cassandra not Penelope and that I was allergic to cats, but he just kept insisting! 'Don't do this,' he kept saying. 'I love you, please come home! I'll never ask you to clean the toilet again.'"

"Marguerite!" Once again the voice rumbled from the living room.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Is your mother telling you her name is Cassandra?"

"Yes, Daddy. Today that's what she's telling me." Marguerite turned to look at her mother who was trying to close the oven door with her foot while carrying two sheets of hot cookies.

"It's not. It's Penelope--"

"Oh," said the little girl, cutting off her father. She jumped excitedly off the stool and exclaimed, "That was Daddy! The man who said you have cats!" She tugged on her mother's shirt and looked up at her for a sign of agreement.

"Yes," said her mother with the peaceful smile of a madonna. "The poor beautiful man to whom I had been speaking was utterly disgusted by my abandonment of my husband and my pets. He called me a crazy woman and told your father that he should look for someone better, someone who would feed the cats and clean the toilet. Then he grabbed his hat and left the bar. So you see, Marguerite, your father ran off the best potential suitor of my life that fateful night at Singles in Charleston, South Carolina. And because there were no other decent men in the bar, I was forced to talk to him -- this weirdo who made up stories about me and my life. This man who had no ethical qualms about lying in order to get a girl. So, as it stands, I'm sure you can understand how that night we fell in love."

The man got up from his recliner in the living room and walked sluggishly into the kitchen. He leaned against a counter, and after sharing a secretive, droll smile with his wife, spoke to his daughter.

"Marguerite," he said one final time.

"Yes, Daddy?" asked the little girl. She sat back on the stool with her elbows on the counter and her chin cupped in her hands.

"Is your mother telling you she and I met at a singles' bar?"

"Yes, Daddy. You know you did."

"It's not true. We met at a picnic. At a church. On a Sunday. In Des Moines."

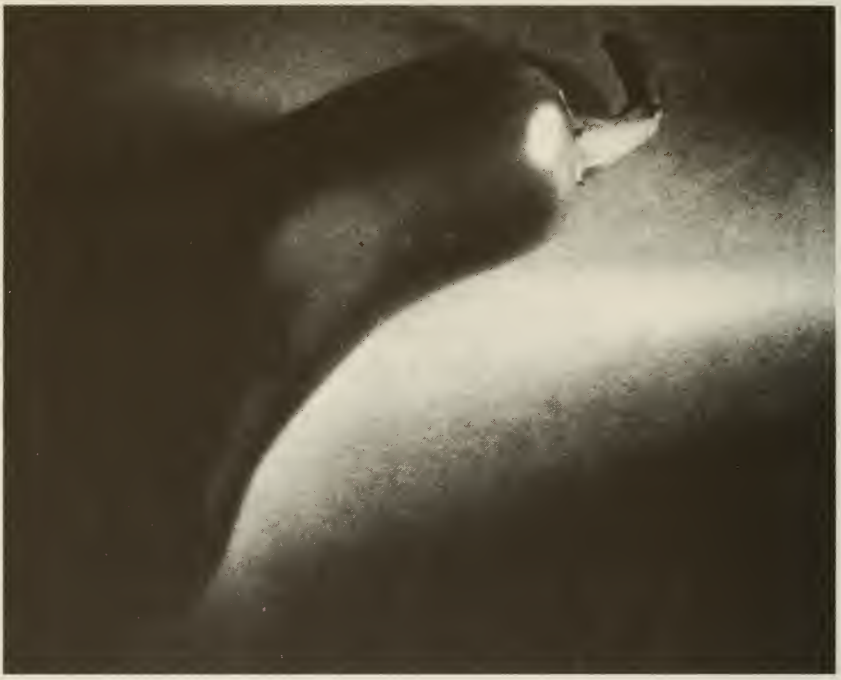
Not Even a Valentine

I will love you for as long
As the kingfisher keeps his point of view
Perched on the miles of confessional wires
Connecting me to you

And I will love you for the time
It takes the shells you gather from the sea
To send you running from your sandy rooms
Returning you to me

Or I will love you until trails
Of winter suns no longer lead me home
To sound such promises: I'm only breath,
My heart inside a poem.

David Starnes



A Light in the Dark

gelatin silver print

Jennifer Heidmann

Blackberries

Blackberries?????
BLACKberries!?, but why?
When indeed they are--
actually are definitely--
quite a decided study
in purpleness.
Deep, Deep, Purple,
with tiny silver reflections
of a hundred suns
on miniature satin globes.
Yes, purple surely.
Certainly more purple than
most grapes can claim.
Purpler and less fickle
than purple evening skies,
which are apt to leak
pinks and lavender and such.
Pretty, but not purple.
Eggplants do purple rather nicely
but without much excitement.
It is blackberries that
do purple so well.
BLACKberries!

Brenda Talley

Namesake

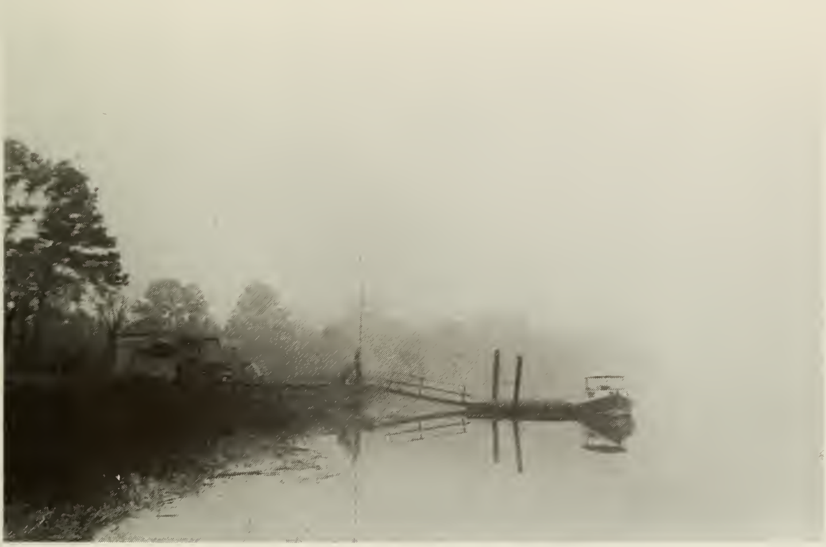
Like a town crier in mid-afternoon
an unseen neighbor calls out for her child.
She sings the first fond syllable (the word is day)
and hangs it in the humid air.
Held by hearing it seems to sway
and, said, evaporates.

The second half is thin (the letter v).
It trails away, falls back into the green and gracious yard,
then silence for a heartbeat, two beats, three,
until the mother reaches up again.
The name is heightened by a question mark,
as measured as the angle of a roof.
It might have fastened to her mouth.

A smaller voice, a pebble tossed at cobblestones,
a splinter in the front porch step,
lifts from the August heat
more in a register than in reply.

His is the name imposed upon my Christian name
(the formal meant *beloved*
before I heard it spoken, heard it hold)
and shed much later than its innocence.
I almost answer for that child
as if returning home by sound.

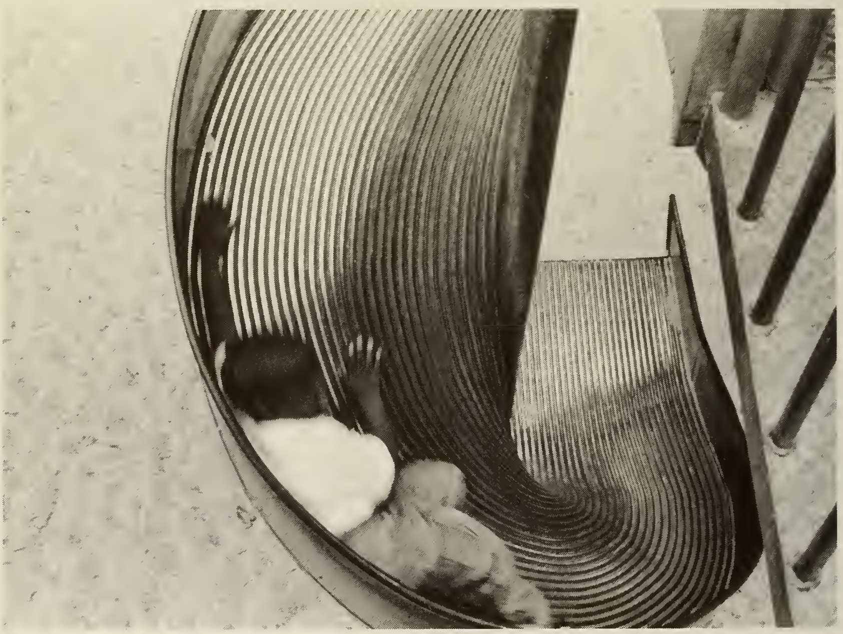
David Starnes



Fog

gelatin silver print

Sue Bishop-Stapleton



Burnt Hands III

gelatin silver print

Donna Callahan

Calliope

Calliope

1995

Moonlight Series No. 2
Theresa Anderson

Volume XII
Armstrong State College

Calliope

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Rachael Green of the Fine Arts Department chose the *Lillian Spencer Award* winner for Best Artwork.

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Cover Design: Shawn Kelshaw

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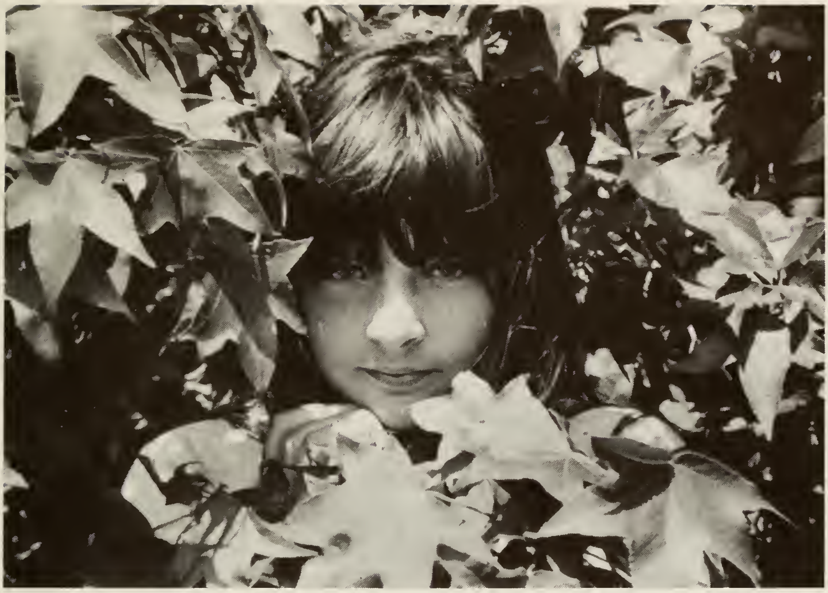


Kristen
Sherri Ralph

Endymion Bound

Mary E. O' Sako

Selene and Timothy came to a stop beside an open field, veiled in moonlight. They had been slowly driving the back roads of their hometown when Selene had spotted this place. She touched the hollow at the base of her throat as she watched Timothy switch off the engine, allowing the warmth of a pleasant apprehension to spread through her. This was their first time, their first time alone together, really alone.

The field was crowded with Queen Anne's lace and black-eyed Susans, hushed and vigilant. Tim disengaged the convertible's flimsy top, throwing it back to reveal night birds on the wing. They called out their alarm as they rose in the silvery sky.

Now they know, Selene thought dreamily. She undid her seat belt and slid towards him. Breathless, she felt breathless. She could see her own limbs move languidly in the glowing darkness. Tim reached out for her, encircling her shoulders and pulling her closer, closing the velvety space between them. She suddenly fancied them great lovers of yore, seated just so in his gilded chariot, ecstasy and immortality before them. The great white eye of the full moon stared from just over his shoulder, turning the strong, clean lines of his face to marble.

Endymion? Selene breathed silently, trembling and closing her eyes. She followed the trail his lips glazed, first over her cheeks, then her mouth, soft and questioning. Her pulse quickened, echoing in her ear like the warning tick of a clock. *Is-he-the-one?* It tolled repeatedly. She allowed her mind to catch in its mesmerizing beat, flowing back eons ago, to the day they'd met.

She drifted, then came to a stop on a particularly sweet afternoon, a mere month ago. It was July. She was reading in the old gazebo that marked the edge of her property. Situated on a small crest above the edge of town and the fields and woods beyond, it was her secret place, her sanctuary. She had discovered it as a child of eight, when she believed it to be enchanted. A place where after hours of play she was certain she could hear her name in the breezes that came to cool and comfort her there. A place she came to believe protected her from the pains of the ordinary world.

Now at twenty-one, she felt it as an old friend, a friend she relied on often since the untimely death of her parents two summers before. Orphans themselves, they had left all to her, their only child. Their "strange, *unearthly* child," her mother would often comment with a laugh as she listened to Selene's daily tales of the magic she'd experienced about the place.

After their funeral, she had dropped out of college immediately, all too grateful to return to this world. Never one for chatty friends or crowds, she welcomed the solitude and the quiet dignity this setting provided while she grieved, and waited. It was a cocoon from which she would emerge only when the right someone, or *something*, beckoned.

That particular July afternoon she had chosen to indulge in her passion for Greek and Roman mythology. It was a passion she craved often. Those magnificent stories of ethereal beings seemed to ease the ache of a lifelong void deep within herself. Somewhere. On that day she had sat beneath the rose-covered arches of her gazebo, away from the close rooms of the house, deeply engrossed in the legend of Diana, goddess of the moon, and her sleeping lover Endymion — her favorite.

A single triumphant shout had brought her reluctantly back to the present. Sighing deeply she stood to see a young man out in the field below. He had just thrown a javelin and was peering towards the spot it had impaled, several feet from where he stood.

She stretched and smoothed the hem of her shorts, then gathered up her book for the short walk back up to the house. She glanced once more at the lone intruder and saw that he had raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun and had spotted her there. Selene froze instantly, her hand flying to her throat. The young man below resembled a Grecian statue in that moment, his arms bronzed perfection against the sleeveless white jersey he wore.

"Endymion," she whispered, hugging the book tightly. The dark young man had waved then. Standing entranced, she watched him stride powerfully towards her. He drew so close she could see the tiny beads of sweat on his skin and how they twinkled like diamonds in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Hi," he called out, smiling. "Is this your property?"

Selene stared helplessly, the surrounding quiet broken only by the distant barking of a dog.

"Hello, am I interrupting a study session or something, Mrs. . . . Miss?"

"Yes, uh, Selene, my name is Selene . . . with a Miss," she smiled cautiously back at him. "And where you stand now is my property, where you just threw your javelin is not."

"Yeah? Great! Well, Miss Selene, I am sorry for trespassing, and I am very sorry if I interrupted a study session. . . my javelin and I will soon get lost." He gave her a deep bow and backed up a step.

"Wait, it's okay, this . . ." she held up her book, "this is strictly pleasure, so don't leave on my account, really, I mean there is no problem." She could feel a hard blush rising in the face of his pleasant gaze. *Why?*

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. It's just that I don't get many backdoor visitors, Mr. . . . ?"

"Timothy, Tim Braun," he answered cheerfully, "and this," he swiped an arm towards the field, "is a pipe dream. You just caught me bangin' on it red-handedly Miss Selene." He paused and laughed then, a rich melody that calmed her wary senses. Selene smiled with him.

"Watcha readin' ?" He stooped as if to read the hidden title.

"Greek mythology," Selene answered timidly, raising her chin.

"Greek mythology, hmmm . . ." He raised his eyebrows in gentle mockery. "Interesting." He smiled again and winked. His stamp of approval had been like the warmth of that balmy afternoon, and Selene had felt the newborn stirrings of something alien inside her. She had smiled back.

Is he the one? Selene wondered again on this midsummer's eve, one month later. She reveled now in his embrace, keenly aware of his breathing, his movements. He unbuttoned her blouse, and drew a gasp from her as he touched her breast. His touch was so foreign and yet so *fragile. You strange, unearthly child,* her mother's long-buried words flooded her mind. Selene pulled at his hair and kissed him fiercely.

A small puff of wind grew suddenly and traced its way across her forehead, carrying a small single sound on its current.

"Diana."

Selene's eyes flew open. She tensed and listened with every pore. A dog howled plaintively in the distance. She could see the moonswept scape beyond Tim's busy shoulder; it revealed no sudden threat. She sank back slowly, as if in a dream, her hand poised at her throat. Tim was pulling at her belt, drawing her reluctantly from her impromptu post. She shook her head and tried to focus on his movements. He was still fumbling with her belt, cursing softly at its inability to budge. Resting against the back of the seat, she placed a hand on his arm and motioned for him to stop. After a moment's hesitation, she loosened the belt in one swift motion. A stronger breeze penetrated the cab of the car, lifting a tendril of hair from her shoulder, releasing a long and wistful sigh.

"Diana."

Across the meadow somewhere, the dog howled again, endless and low. Selene sat bolt upright, pulling herself from Tim's grasp. Her eyes raked over their surroundings, noting any shadow that might harbor a fiend among the dancing wildflowers. All was quiet, the trees dark and towering sentinels around the tranquil setting.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked thickly, clearing his throat.

"I don't know . . . I'm sorry, but something feels . . .

different." She pulled at her clothing with clammy fingers that would barely obey.

"What?" He stroked at her hair.

"There's something . . ."

"What do you mean, are you sick or somethin'?"

"I don't know." She stopped and looked up at him. "Didn't you hear something?"

"You mean the dog?"

"Well, yes, and something else, you . . . didn't hear . . ." She squirmed under his questioning stare, pulling her blouse more tightly about her. She found herself suddenly longing for home. The gazebo. Her simple, solo existence there tantalized her. It called out to her. A third wind blew in from afar and eddied in the seat between them. Along with it came the scent of . . . *wisteria?* Selene shivered.

"Please, Tim, couldn't we just go somewhere else?" She glanced around hastily before edging closer to him. "It's really *strange* here." She looked back out at the field.

"Excuse me, but I thought you liked it here." He tugged at her sleeve. "I know *I* do. Besides, that dog sounds pretty far away to me. Sounds like some huntin' dog on the lam. I really don't think he's a problem."

"I did like it, I do, but, I think now. . . I'm not sure. Forgive me for acting so paranoid, but isn't *this* the same no matter where we are?" Selene smiled weakly at him.

"Yeah, sure it is, but I have to admit I *do* feel like some sixteen-year-old kid sneakin' around out here, but, I have a brilliant idea. Let's you and me just sneak on back to your house, or to my apartment. I'm really sure my roomie won't mind butting out for awhile, he owes me one anyhow. . .we could pick up some brew, some takeout. . ." He began to reach for her again. Selene stiffened.

"No, not the house, not yet. I know that sounds weird to you, but please just bear with me on that, okay? And not your place either. I'm not particularly fond of tossing anyone out onto the street, not just to satisfy some middle of the night craving, favors owed or not. Let's just drive around a little more, okay? There is quite a bit of country around here. It's just that this particular spot turned out a little . . . *spookier* than I imagined. It feels . . . I mean isn't that all right?

Tim shook his head and sighed, drumming his fingers on the back of the seat. "Yeah, okay, okay, why not?" He sighed again and reached for the dangling keys, turning them in the ignition. The engine ground sluggishly for an instant before dying with a hollow click.

"Oh, no!" he groaned, "not now, not now." He twisted the keys again. Silence. Tim lay his forehead against the steering wheel. "Why me?" His voice sounded muffled and hard. "This is starting to sound like one of those dumb-ass out of gas in the dark stories." He raised his head and looked out at the road. "Sorry, Miss Selene."

"What do you think it is?" Selene asked anxiously. She peered at the jumble of dials and gauges that decorated the dashboard.

"Who knows? Wait here a second." He hoisted himself out. The car rocked gently with the slam of the door, then the raising of the hood. Soft, banging, thudding sounds drifted back to where Selene sat, rubbing at her invisible necklace, one eye fastened on the dark shrubbery that bordered their dusty trail. *This is not working.* She jumped in her seat as Tim let the hood drop with a harsh bang. He walked back and reached in, trying the keys once more. Nothing happened.

"Well . . . shit." He glanced up and down the road. "Looks like I walk." He tossed the keys under the seat and looked at Selene. "You up for aerobics? If not, try the radio, maybe that will work." Before she could reply, he was off, kicking at an occasional rock as he went, sending clouds of dust up into the moist, evening air.

"Wait!" Selene shouted, climbing quickly from the car and stumbling to catch his receding form. For what seemed a long while they walked, Selene now and then fighting to match Tim's stride, Tim slowing then speeding up again, whistling an impatient little number each time she fell behind, or when she stopped to remove a pebble lodged in her sandal.

The silence was broken only by cricket chatter and the sound of their crunching footsteps. *Am I Endymion bound?* Selene thought wryly, falling behind once more.

The trees began to thicken, creeping closer. Their lacy black canopy of branches overhead formed a tunnel that threatened to squeeze out the diminishing threads of moonlight. The sounds of twigs snapping and leaves rustling came and went among the wall of trees surrounding their trudging forms.

"Dryads, leave us!" Selene sang out suddenly into the darkness. She stopped instantly, alarmed by the spontaneity of her words, as well as their immediate consequences. The noises ceased abruptly, silence ensued.

"Who are you talking to back here?" Tim had retreated back to where she stood.

"Dryads, in Greek mythology, they were spirits of the trees, wood nymphs," she explained shyly. She could feel the weight of his smirk in the dark, but it failed to distract the pounding of her heart.

"Yeah? Well I think you've been reading too much of that *stuff*, Miss Selene." He snorted. "That sounded like your garden variety raccoon to me." He laughed and grabbed her hand, pulling her along behind him. Selene remained silent. The trees finally began to recede and a small white light appeared. It shimmered and danced provocatively, growing larger as they rounded a steep curve. Selene could make out the form of a house just beneath it. A dog barked loud and close, heralding their arrival.

"Man, I hope these yokels have a phone," said Tim. He dropped her hand and forged ahead to the little house. Selene stopped at a neat picket fence that lined the property. Her chest tightening, she raised a hand to her throat. Beyond the fence, a wisteria-tangled yard rambled on, its incoherent lavender mounds interrupted only by a single stone walkway that connected the white house to the roadway. The house itself was one story and long, with windows set high and sideways into its walls. A lavender-tinted window, crescent in shape, had been placed into the center of the front door.

Tim's knock sounded sharp and intrusive here. Selene, still standing at the gate, fought the fleeting notion to call out to him to run, that whomever resided here, resided alone. That whomever it was should *never* be disturbed. *Whomever?*

She drank deeply from the wisteria's scent. It encircled her. She felt herself drawn to the walkway just as a shadow moved behind the crescent window in the door. Selene reached Tim's side just as the door flew open. A bespectacled old man stood there, holding a walker.

"Children at my door, welcome sweet children, welcome!" he cried with a hearty laugh. He held up a hand as Tim tried to speak. Nodding knowingly, the old man turned and crept back inside, beckoning for them to follow. He retreated down a short hallway. He was dressed in white: white sweatshirt, white tennis shorts. Selene couldn't help but notice how well-muscled his legs were for one so decrepit.

Tim just shrugged and closed the door behind them. Selene held on to his sleeve and followed closely. The old man stopped beside a large wooden door, one of three in the hall. He reached over his walker and opened the door wide. A brighter light spilled from this room. They entered to find themselves surrounded by a dazzling display of white. White walls, white furniture, white marble busts, and immediately the dogs were upon them, pushing in from all sides. Selene and Timothy stood still amid the pressing, snuffling noses. All breeds and sizes, they covered the immaculate floor, inspecting the newcomers in unison.

"Now, now, leave the children! Leave them!" the old man chuckled. He made his way to a large armchair that sat in the center of the room like a throne.

"Do they bite?" Tim asked, as a German shepherd with large brown eyes regarded him calmly.

"Hah!" the old man spat, settling further into his perch. "Not these girls, my girls, my special dogs!"

"You mean they are *all* females ?" Selene asked, her mouth slightly agape. She cautiously patted the head of a

Welsh Corgi sitting near her feet, its nose quivering beneath huge elfin ears.

"Yes ma'am, not a rowdy male among 'em! Not one!"

Selene raised her eyebrows at Tim.

"Uh, do you have a phone we could use? We had a bit of car trouble back down the road." Tim jerked his head in the direction of the door.

"Go on, young man, go on. Phone's through there, cross that hall, there's a door. Directly across, I mean. That's the kitchen. Phone's on the wall." He shooed Tim away with one hand as he spoke, digging out a white hankie with the other. He proceeded to polish his spectacles.

"Yeah, okay." Tim nodded to the old man. "Be right back." He grinned, and winked at Selene, then patted her shoulder as he turned and waded back through the dogs and out the door. Soft thumping sounds fell upon the room. The dogs were settling about the floor. Selene allowed her eyes to browse timidly before stopping at an exquisite bust of a woman resting on the mantle.

"Hestia," she exclaimed, "goddess of the domestic hearth. "

"So, I see you share my. . . passion." The old man was smiling. He nudged a spotless footstool from beneath his chair.

"Sit. I don't bite either, I don't." He grinned slyly. Selene inched forward and sank into the footstool. She was suddenly aware that her body felt heavy, cumbersome. She smiled back at the old man, grateful to be sitting.

Selene was aware of other busts encircling the room. They seemed to swirl like live things. *So many, so many* . . . Selene swallowed. Feeling too warm, she tugged lightly at the collar of her blouse, aware of the old man's steady gaze.

"Your name, dear?" he asked finally.

"Selene."

"Ah, yes . . . *Selene*, Greek goddess of the moon. But to the Romans it meant . . . *Diana* ."

"Yes," Selene whispered, "*yes*."

"The huntress, fierce. She fears no man, no beast!" His voice was growing deeper, more potent. Selene could only nod.

"*Diana.* . . time is brief as we slumber . . ." He fixed her more deeply in his crooked stare. "Keep unto you . . ." He placed a small, cool object in her hand. A round and silver amulet, attached to a silver, snakelike chain. The body of a woman was carved into its surface. A crescent gemstone, lavender in shade, lay embedded in her forehead. It glittered like a cold and ancient flame.

"No, I can't, I . . . can't."

"Yes!"

"Diana, Selene, Diana," he chanted, his voice growing stronger.

Selene felt flushed in the growing glow of the amulet. She wanted to be part of it, for it to be part of her. At once a long-suppressed hunger emerged, growing inside of her, consuming her with sharp pangs of longing.

"Diana, Selene, Diana." Waxing and waning.

She swayed in the stream of his words. She felt clumsy and large. She had to lift her entire head just to look upon him. The old man had leaned forward, into a ray of waiting moonlight. Gone were the wizened features, the spectacles. He was years younger, centuries older. His hair a glossy crown on his noble head. Sinew and muscle stood out clear and strong in the curve of his neck. And his eyes, above all else his eyes: they were burning white starlight, flickering flames. And when he smiled, his teeth were bright and sharp against the rich red velvet of his lips.

Selene's breathing deepened as the room began to expand and fall away. Great columns appeared, soaring against the impossible stretch of time. And the sweetest music, so high and rare, the flutes of Pan . . .

"Endymion awaits." His voice penetrated her. Selene closed her eyes and the music faded away slowly, becoming a soft hum. Her breathing became regular, the swaying stopped, and she could feel the room returning more solid around her.

She opened her eyes to see the old man sitting back in his chair, head tilted to one side as he smiled at her.

''Daydreamin,' missy?" he laughed, sounding coarse and old again.

"Why?" Selene asked weakly.

"Why what? There are no others here." He gestured around the room, then laughing and winking he pressed a gnarled finger to his lips.

The dogs shifted slightly, the door opened, and Tim reappeared.

"Hey!" He clicked his fingers and smiled at Selene. "I got a hold of Mark, my roommate. He's on his way. I told him about where to meet us. I think he got it."

He looked at the old man. "Hey, thanks for the phone, man. I, ah, guess we better scoot if we're gonna catch Mark." He waved at the old man.

"Ready?"

"Yes," Selene answered softly. She smiled at the old man. "Thank you."

"Yeah, thanks." Tim echoed, holding his hand out to Selene. She grabbed it, moving gracefully through the parting sea of dogs, pulling Tim behind her.

"Farewell, children!" the old man called out from his chair. All around him a hundred pairs of canine eyes blinked like fireflies.

"I think you know the way out now!"

Outside, the warm air was loaded with the wisteria. Selene let go of Tim and stepped lightly through their purple haze and into the street.

"Hey, wait up!" Tim called after her.

"What a weirdo, huh? 'Me and my girls'!" His growling mimicry grated against the silken darkness.

"Leave him be!" Selene interrupted sharply.

"Excuse me, Miss Selene!" he grumbled. "What the hell anyway." He floundered to keep his position beside her.

"I'm sorry, it's just that he was really a sweet old man," she smiled contritely, "and Mark is meeting us so soon! And then," she grabbed his hand again, "we can get back to . . . business?"

"Yeah . . . yeah right." Tim glanced at her curiously as he hurried along.

They traveled the rest of the way in silence. With Selene keeping her hand locked tightly in Tim's, they seemed to glide with relentless, effortless ease, reaching the car in shortened time. Selene released Tim from her grip. Before they had a chance to speak, Mark's truck came roaring and jouncing down the road, raising dust like fog in the beam of his headlights.

"Hey, Timbo!" he yelled out over the low booming sounds of the rock music emanating from around him as he lowered his window.

"Hey . . ." Tim called back slowly, like a man awakening from sleep.

"What's up, man?" He laughed and leaned further from the window to peer at Tim's car, where Selene now lolled against the lifeless hood.

"Wish I knew!" He glanced at Selene. "Car's dead, man!"

"Let's hear it! " The thunderous sounds of the rock music died as Tim leaned over and fished the keys from under the seat. He ground them into the ignition. The car's motor hummed smoothly to life. Selene smiled.

"What the hell?" Tim slapped the side of the car. "This bitch was dead, I mean really dead!"

"Yeah, yeah!" Mark shook his head and leered at Selene.

"Really, it was! I don't get it!" Tim turned the ignition off, then on again. Again the engine roared.

"What now?" Mark drummed on his steering wheel in time to a phantom tune in his head.

"Hold on a sec!" Tim grabbed Selene's arm. "Well, the night's still young in my book, what do you say?"

"Home."

"You mean your home? I thought it was off limits."

"I meant take me home, please, as in 'drop me off'," Selene answered calmly.

"What?"

"Some other night, please. I really don't feel up to it now." She blinked and looked away. "I'd forgotten there are some things I have to attend to early." She looked back into his eyes. "Really."

"Come on, no way, you're kidding, right?" He squeezed her arm more tightly.

"No, I am not." She pulled away and glared at him.

"I'm sorry." He ignored the blast from Mark's horn. Moving closer he touched her cheek.

"Please, Tim." She offered a tiny smile. "I really need to go home now."

He stared into her face for a long second. "Okay . . . let's go then." He turned and waved at Mark. "Hey man, follow us. I'll buy you a beer!"

Mark gave a thumbs up and rolled up his window. As Tim pulled out into the road, Mark followed, his headlights shining like twin moons through the rear window. They rode in silence, the weight of the evening between them. Selene allowed him a brief kiss after he maneuvered the car beside the curb in front of her darkened house.

"Next week try it again?" he offered quietly, and smiled. Selene nodded and smiled back. She rose quickly from the car and was on her front porch, never looking back when he drove away, Mark in noisy pursuit.

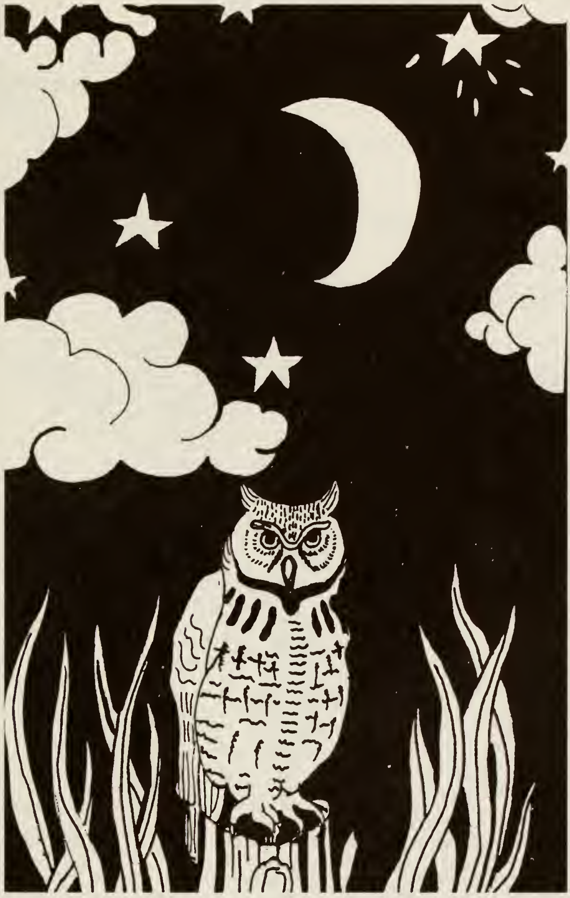
Selene turned her face into the rising breeze that pushed impatiently at her hair and clothing. She went around the side of the house, through the dew-laden backyard to the garden below. She crossed to the gazebo, crawling with its white roses, so pure in the moonlight. She stood in its center and put a hand to her throat, pulling the amulet from beneath the collar of her blouse, where it had nestled perfectly in the smooth hollow there. Its coolness burned into her.

"Endymion," she whispered. The roses were like small marble figures that seemed to brighten immediately.

They began a dance of prelude, swirling faster and faster, always at the perimeter of her vision. They danced and danced. Selene began to sway.

A wind blew powerfully from across the calm of the moon-draped fields below. All other sounds ceased as it deposited a single sound in its wake.

"Diana."



Moonlight Series No. 3
Theresa Anderson

Natural Events

Lawn mower growls
over noise of black
bird's cawing, red-headed

woodpecker flies down
street, perpendicular
to flight pattern of

plane's spiraling trail
overhead. Blue birds ruffle
dried palm leaves sweeping

down past my chair where
bees buzz atop
nandinas swaying

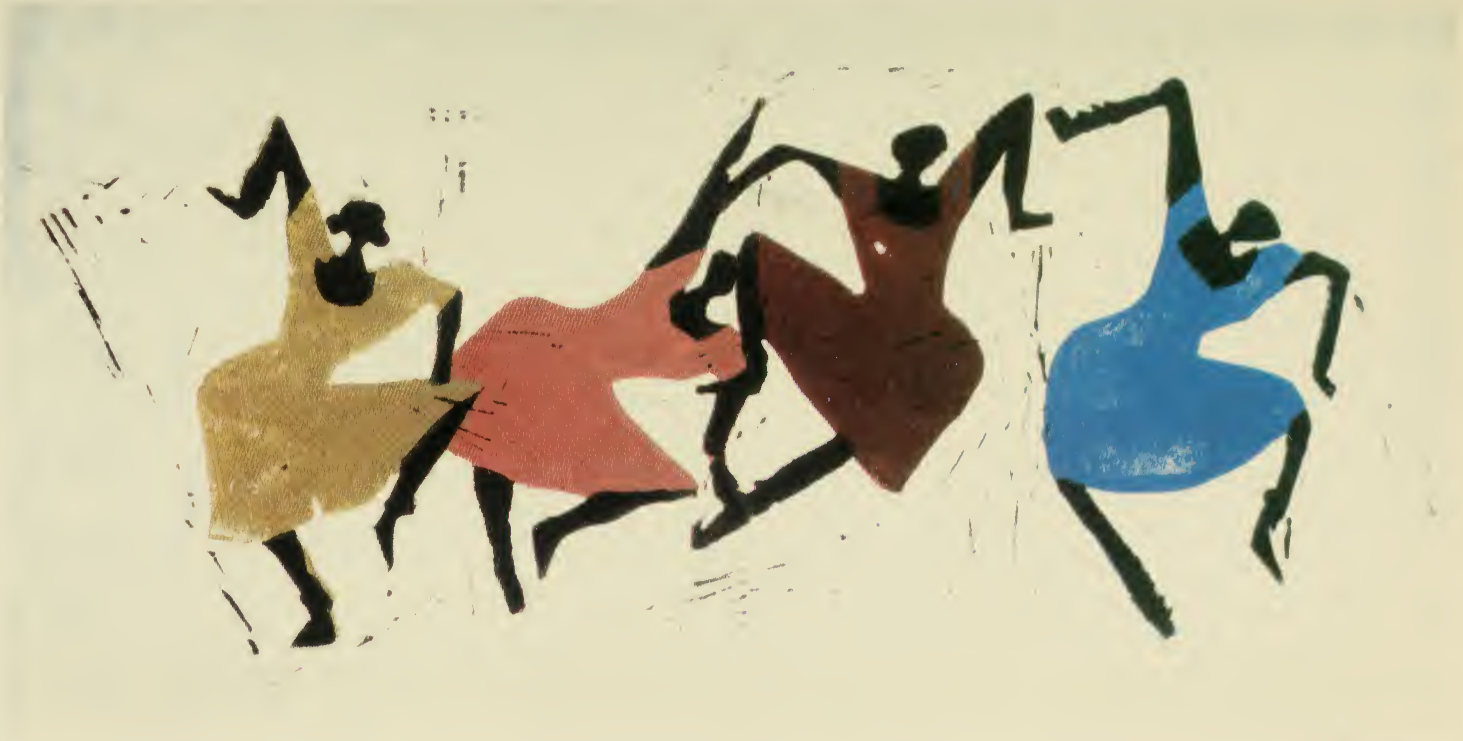
in slight breeze. Closer
orange butterfly skims
fuchsia dianthus

potted on wrought iron
table, sun casting
shadow below. Above

on a branch cooing closely
is a pair of plump gray
doves. Double

black love bugs sit
united on my arm,
constantly copulating.

Rachel McReynolds Brown



The Dance
Stacy McClain

That Dark Winter

I had a fake laugh, a pretentious smile.
Black Michael knew it. He saw,
Before he stepped over to the wrong side.
Ralph gave in. Bullet in the head,
Christmas Day.
So did what's-her-name . . . Lynn,
But she took it in the heart.

Christ! I was too young . . .

Dane and I would climb the tree--
The one in the park across from Officers' Row--
and drink Evan Williams. No chaser,
Unless we did boilermakers. Didn't matter,
All I ever wanted to know was how I got home.
I had the band, you know.
But that's all I had.
I knew I was going to make it,
Knew I had it in me,
And I knew I would find it someday,
Maybe after a few more songs.
Dane'bramage, Psycho-Eric the fugitive, and myself.
When it comes down to it,
We weren't that bad.

Ellie brought you over,
But I didn't believe in love.
I was like Ralph;
Ralph -- The Eater of Shotgun Barrels,
Ralph the Thorough.
And you, looking so mature to be so young,
So metropolitan, bewildered by me?
Ragged, dirty jeans, a faded shirt
Drying in the salt air . . . pickled,
Long greasy hair and the smell of cheap beer,

Sweat. Not the sweat you know.
No, the sweat of an animal,
Fight or flight. The sweat of fear.
How could I not feel your presence
Crawling in my frightened mind
Like the stamp of the sun,
Vivid even after you look away?

That aura of innocent mystery
lurking beneath your smile.
Your dark eyes and sidelong glance.
I pretended not to notice as you sat,
hands between your knees, toes turned in,
absorbing the room
when you added just a word to its conversation.

I called. I offered you a ride.
I took you to Bonaventure cemetery,
Put my round shades on the life-size Jesus statue:
Instant John Lennon...
            But I worshiped you. I'd found my icon,
My missing jigsaw-puzzle piece.
A princess? It's your middle name.
"Princess of the Morning Star," am I to blame?
Am I to blame, my little dove,
In that dark winter I fell in love?

Forrest Jackson

Safety in Numbers

Susan Parker

"Okay, sit back a little, and don't slouch," Theresa says, expertly dabbing a tiny, wedge-shaped brush into a lipstick.

Really Raisin. What a stupid name for a lipstick. *Burnished Bronze* would sound so much more sophisticated.

She tests the brush on the back of her hand before leaning over to fill in the outline she traced over my mouth a few minutes ago. "You should definitely get some of these brushes, Lisa. They don't cost too much and they last forever."

I don't want to ask how much they are, because people look at you funny when you ask how much things are in here, but I'm not sure I brought enough cash to cover the facial and make-over. Oh, what the hell, I'll write a check and stop by the bank later. "I've been looking for a good set of brushes. You think these are the best?"

"I've had mine since I got my state license, and that was six years ago. Kelly Martin gave them to me when I passed the cosmetology exam. Do you remember her? She was in homeroom with us before she dropped out of school. She used to work here, before the baby and all. She said I had a natural talent, and natural talent should not be wasted on cheap brushes. I've never used anything else since."

I divine from this testimonial that the brushes are a bit on the expensive side, but I don't feel like I can say no, and besides, I can think of a bunch of other reasons why I should get them—I've already given Mom and Dad money this month, it's Saturday and I'm going out tonight, and I know Amy and Renee don't have brushes like these—and besides, I want them. "Well, you'd better add a set to my other things, Theresa. I'm sure I won't get the same effect using the cheap ones."

She smiles and nods to Charlene, who disappears into the stockroom to get the brushes. "Okay, we just need a bit of finish powder and we're done." She picks up a fat brush, poking it into a tub of loose powder, and taps it gently on the edge of the pot. "Do it just like this," she says, dusting my face lightly, "or you'll wind up using too much, and you'll look like a ghost."

Theresa always lets me in on a trade secret or two every time I get my face done. The first thing she ever taught me was to get all my cosmetic ducks in a row before I start putting anything on. The second was to make sure that I'm not allergic to the make-up, preferably before Saturday night.

"No matter what kind of cosmetics you use, though," she had cautioned during last month's visit, "you have to have the right kind of light. If the light's wrong, you won't put the make-up on right, and honey, you won't even look good in candlelight." She told me to go to Farrier's Lighting and ask for a Cameo bulb by name. "That's the only kind of bulb we use in our vanity mirrors here."

I step down awkwardly from the high crimson suede and brass chair. "Ugh, I've been sitting too long."

"Well, the stiff legs are worth it—you look fabulous. How's that Cameo bulb working out for you?" she asks as we head over to the reception desk at the front of the salon.

"I'm going to Farrier's today. I was so busy last month I never had time to pick one up," I say, rummaging around in my bag for my wallet. The truth is, the bulb costs $35, and I didn't have enough money for it. My birthday was a couple of weeks ago, though, and Nana Mills always sends me a check for $50, "for girl things."

Well, you'll just love the difference," she assures me as we arrive at the desk. "Charlene, that's a facial and a make-over, plus everything in this basket, and she has a twenty percent club card," she says crisply. "Next month, Lisa?"

"Next month, Theresa. Thanks a lot."

"See you then."

"That'll be $89.95, Miss Mills," Charlene says pleasantly, handing me the famous crimson, lapis, and gold Chateau San Michelle bag with my cosmetics and brush set as I write out the check and glance at my watch. 2:45 pm—just enough time to run to Farrier's for that bulb and get home to do my nails and toes.

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"Lisa, telephone!" Mom yells up the stairs. "It's Renee."

Shit, I'm right in the middle of doing my lips. "Ma, could you ask her if I can call her back?"

"She says it's important."

"Okay, be right there." I wish for the hundredth time that I had a phone in my bedroom instead of having to use the one in the hall. "Got it!" I yell, saying nothing into the receiver until I hear her hang up the downstairs extension.

"Renee, I have half-painted lips," I greet her. "What's up?"

"Tim's bringing someone."

"Who?"

"A guy named Mark."

"Well, that changes things, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Craig says he's not really anybody."

"Oh, well that's different. Mark . . . I seem to remember a Mark."

"The name sounds vaguely familiar."

"Didn't Tim have a roommate in college named Mark?

"Yeah, I think so."

"Whatever. Did you call Amy yet?"

"No, I thought you could."

"I have half-painted lips, Renee. Do you mind?"

"No, it's okay. I'm ready. Craig, Slip, and Amy are picking me up at 8:45. You're going with Tim and Mark. We'll meet you at Indy's around nine-ish," she says, which always means closer to 9:30.

"Well, I'm glad you called to tell me, because I would have been pissed if I'd gotten into the car and there was someone there."

"Craig says he's not, so don't worry about it. I just thought you'd want to know. How was Theresa today?"

"She's always great. Hey, I finally got that Cameo bulb today. She's right, it makes a big difference. I got a set of their brushes, too."

"Got any money left for drinks tonight?"

"Just barely. Besides, since when do we ever have to buy more than two?"

Renee laughs. "True, true. Go do your lips. I'll talk to you later."

"Later." I hang up the phone and rush back to the warm Cameo light in the bathroom to finish getting ready.

• • • • • • •

The six of us have a strange relationship, Tim, Slip, Craig, Renee, Amy, and I. We go out together almost every weekend, unless one of us has a date with someone else. We don't date each other; that would be like dating a brother or a sister—gross.

Going out with the guys is great, because there are so many situations that we never have to deal with. First of all, no one ever looks like they're alone. For some reason, this tends to attract people; the guys always say that they get more phone numbers now going out with us than they ever did before going out by themselves.

And God knows, Amy, Renee, and I never have a problem getting guys—guys are only interested in the girls that are with other guys, not the girls that are obviously available.

The neat thing is that you don't have to do anything more than arrive together and hang out together for people to think you actually ARE together. Renee came up with a really great idea once: give your money to the guys for the cover charge, and let them pay for you. It looks to everyone else as if someone is paying your way, which, if you're female, is always preferable to paying yourself.

What I really like is that if one of us meets someone that we'd rather get rid of later, it's no problem. Amy, Renee, and I all do a great impersonation of a jealous girlfriend, and Tim, Slip, and Craig can look pretty intimidating when they want to. I mean, who knows what kind of weirdos you'll run into—it's not like they wear a sticker that says, "Hello, my name is CREEP," although that would be convenient.

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Tim and this Mark person are downstairs talking with Mom and Dad as I decide on the ruby earrings I got for my sixteenth birthday and a gold bracelet. I go for a short, button-front black dress instead of the ruffled poet's shirt and blue skirt that I had originally intended to wear, mainly because we're going to Indy's, but also because I don't entirely trust Craig's opinion about Mark. For all I know, he could be somebody.

I check my legs one more time for runs in my stockings, then head downstairs. Walk slow, walk slow, walk slow.

"Hey, Lisa," Tim calls from the living room. "Are you ready? It's almost nine."

"Yeah, I'm ready. How do I look?" I ask, twirling around as I walk into the room.

"Great," he says absently. "You always look great."

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming."

"I'm sure all the guys at Indy's will have plenty of enthusiasm for you," he says waving his friend over. "This is Mark, my roommate from college."

Well, so much for that. He's good-looking, but he's dark, maybe Italian, and my ideal guy looks more like the Fisher-Price man—blond hair, fair skin, and a total yuppie, but with a dark, passionate side. Mom and Dad are smiling their dumb "We Like Him" smile at me over their newspapers from the sofa, which means this guy is a dead bore.

I try to think of something witty to say. "Tim says you're a total lady-killer, Mark, but you seem perfectly safe to me," is the best I can come up with, and I smile at him as he holds out a hand for me to shake. Very safe . . . too bad.

"I swear I haven't killed anyone," he chuckles. "What else have you been saying?" He gives Tim a look.

"I told everyone that you're also a fascist and a chronic bed-wetter." Tim smiles, looking pleased with himself.

"Great, Matheson, that's just great."

"Come on, we need to go," Tim says, moving towards the front door. "See you later, Mr. and Mrs. Mills."

"Have a good time," they call after us. "Nice to have met you, Mark."

Tim's already in the driver's seat, and I automatically move for the front passenger's seat. Mark opens the door for me, and as I look up at him, I can see the light from the street lamps reflect off his dark eyes like metal.

"I get car sick if I sit in back. Do you mind?"

"No, no," he smiles, and I can tell he sees right through the lie. He gives me a look that says he knows I'm not getting out of the back seat when we get to Indy's.

• • • • • • •

There is a huge crowd in the parking lot when we pull in, and there are blue lights from a police car flashing intermittently.

"Shit, I hope there wasn't a fight," I say. "Remember last August, Tim, when they shut the club down just as we got here because some guys had gotten in a major brawl?"

"Hell, yeah." He looks over his shoulder at Mark. "It was outrageous, man. Oh, wait," he says, pointing. "It's just a speeder or something."

"Thank God. Hey, there's Craig," I say, as Mark rolls down his window.

"Where are you parked?" Mark yells, and Craig waves him over to the space the others have saved for us. Slip always parks his car diagonally across two spaces to make sure that we park next to each other. I pull the visor mirror down to check my make-up and hand Tim a five dollar bill for the cover charge as we pull in.

"For services rendered," I tease him. I catch Mark's glance in the mirror as he cocks an eyebrow at us. Tim takes the bill in his teeth and laughs.

The car doors slam as I check my lips and Mark opens my door for me before I get a chance to do it myself.

"Services?"

I accept the hand he holds out to help me from the car, smile at him, and brush past airily to go meet Amy and Renee.

Eat your heart out, Mark.

• • • • • • •

"I swear to God," Amy gripes, "you have to come in here practically naked if you want to compete with the damn waitresses!"

No shit," Renee agrees, eyeing the skimpy scarlet slip dress gyrating past us with a cocktail tray. I wish they'd change their uniforms."

"I don't!" Slip leers at the leggy blonde waitress wearing a white sash with the words Winner's Circle emblazoned on it as she stops to take our drink order.

"If I owned this place, I'd make them wear the same uniforms as the bartenders," I grin, nodding towards the guy standing at the keg tap behind the bar in a royal blue union suit that says Pit Crew on the back.

"Green flag went down twenty minutes ago, guys, you got ten minutes left," the waitress says, wagging her head around in time to the nonsensical top forty music that I'd never listen to outside of a dance club.

Mark looks at Craig blankly. "Green flag?"

"Green flag means there's a drink special," he explains. "Every time you buy one, it counts as one lap in the Indy 500, and when you have 500 laps, you get a T-shirt."

"How many laps do you have?"

"351," the waitress answers for Craig. "He and Slip are the two biggest drunks . . . ah, I mean, best customers, in the bar."

"Thanks, Karen," Slip smirks at her. "What's the special?" he asks as Mark pulls a twenty out of his wallet.

"B-52 shooters for a buck."

"There are seven of us," Mark says, handing her the money. "How about a round of doubles?"

"Sure. Be right back."

"Speaking of drunks," Amy says as Tim joins us, sloshing beer over his hands from the three plastic cups he's holding, with a waitress in tow who's got another four.

"Gentlemen," he roars, "start your engines!'

"Tim, that's so tired," Renee groans, relieving him of a plastic cup. "You have to come up with a new line."

"Thank you thank you thank you," Amy says, plucking a beer from the waitress's tray. "Hey, Renee, Paul Goodman and Jeff Leary are at the bar." She links her arm through Renee's, and pulls her in the direction of the blue neon light over *The Pit.*

"Hey, hey, watch the brew!" Renee looks over her shoulder at me. "Back in a few. Don't let the sots steal my shot."

"Your alcohol is safe with me." I look around, scanning the mob for somebody interesting, or at least familiar, to flirt with. Apparently, my Fisher-Price man has yet to reveal himself tonight, so I turn back to Mark. Practice Makes Perfect.

"Doesn't take them very long to get going, does it?" Mark says, handing me a beer.

"So many men, so little time," I reply. "Gotta work fast if you're going to get to them all by last call." I take a deep swallow of the beer while he has a good laugh over that one. "Okay, now watch Renee," I say conspiratorially. "She'll put her hand on his arm, flip her hair, probably laugh at some lame joke of his, and then it's all over—the guy's a goner."

"Oh, is that how it works?"

I laugh. "It works for me."

"Guys don't get that devious about women. We just hit them over the head with our clubs and drag them back to our caves," he jokes. I chuckle lightly, not really amused, but he's Tim's friend.

"Come on, let's go dance," he says, taking my arm.

"Well . . . wait, our shots are here."

"No problem," he says, taking two glasses off the tray. "We'll just take them to go."

Oh, what the hell, I'll just ask Tim later to tell Mark that he's not my type. There's no harm in a dance. I finish my beer and follow him out onto the dance floor.

Everyone else seems to consider this a novel idea; Renee and Amy follow us with their shots and their men, and Slip, Craig, and Tim are trying to coax some girls to go dance with them. For some reason, this makes me feel better. I start to relax and enjoy the music, joining in the loud "whoop" as we all drink down our shots and pass the empty cups off to a waitress.

The song ends, and the damn D.J. throws on a slow love song. I stand there, staring at Mark like an idiot, while everyone else pairs off. He won't let go of my hand, and I don't want to make a scene, so I stay and dance with him. The light on the dance floor changes to red, with little bubbles of white flitting through it.

"Why do they think this is romantic?" I ask Mark. "I feel like I'm in a deranged fish tank or something."

Dammit, I can feel his hips leaning into me. He's too close. I feel smothered. I pull away as the song mercifully ends and the beat picks up. INXS with strobe lights—thank God.

How do you feel?
I'm lonely.
What do you think?
Can't think at all.

"Where are you going?" he says, and his voice seems different to me.

"It's not a slow song." I pull away as he snakes his arm around my waist and I feel his fingers close on my rear end. Shit.

"Hey, it works for me."

The strobe lights are so weird; they make Mark look as if someone were cutting out every other motion of his body, so that he appears here one moment and there the next. He looks like a caricature of a person dancing as he leans towards me and looks right in my eyes.

"I think it works for you, too. Come on."

I'm out of here. Tim's just going to have to call off his caveman friend, and I could care less if he thinks I'm being a bitch.

I pull away from him to walk off the dance floor, and then I feel this jarring pain in my chest as I stumble back into Renee. She turns with an irritated "Hey!" and sucks in her breath.

"Holy shit!" She rushes over and grabs my collar.

I realize that my skin feels cold—the front of my dress is wide open.

Renee pulls off the cropped jacket she's wearing and spreads it over my chest. "Amy!"

"Jesus Christ! Come on." Amy grabs my arm and steers us towards the ladies' room.

I'm coughing. I can't speak. My chest is killing me.

"What happened?" Amy yells over the music.

I catch a glimpse of Tim pushing Mark and yelling something at him before the ladies' room door closes behind us, muffling the loud music outside.

"Fuck, I don't think I can fix this, Lisa," Renee says matter-of-factly, examining the bodice of my dress. "Three buttons are missing, and this one's just barely hanging on."

"You're going to have a hell of a bruise there. What happened?" repeats Amy, rubbing her hands over my shoulders.

"I don't know." I clutch my dress closed and look at Renee. "I don't know. What happened?" I'm screaming, my chest feels so tight, and my whole head feels burning hot. What just happened to me?

It hurts to scream, to talk even, and I lean on the sink, trying to get air into my lungs.

"Jesus, we have to get her out of here," Renee says nervously to Amy. "Go tell Slip we need his car."

I hear Amy leave as the muffled noise outside blasts into the ladies' room when she opens the door. There is no music now, only a loud burst of voices shouting, and the relative quiet descends again as the door shuts.

"Come on, let's see if we can get you fixed up a little," Renee says, putting her arm around my shoulders and turning on the cold water tap. She squats down in front of me and frowns, looking closely at the tears and pulled threads on my dress where the polished buttons used to be. She picks at them for a minute while I stand there wheezing. "Put my jacket on, Lisa." Renee shakes her head at me as Amy returns.

"Damn, that was fast, Amy. What's going on?"

"Let's go. The police are closing the club," Amy says, holding Slip's keys. "There's been a fight."

I wipe my fingers over my eyes and look in the mirror.

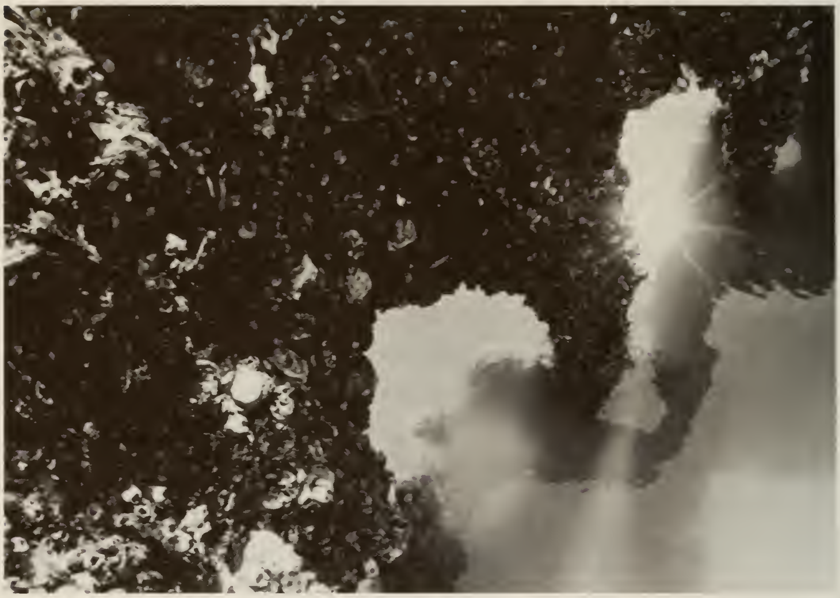
The fluorescent lights overhead cast a greenish tinge over the antiseptic-looking metal fixtures in the bathroom.

Mascara stands out on my pale skin in wide smears; my skin looks sallow under the light.

I look ghoulish, garish.

I shake my head at Renee.

I can't fix this.



Metaphysical Jetty
Keith Langston

To Mary Stewart

Brilliant stars stud a
Black domed sky
Like a ring of wolves eyes

A blaze of darkness
An innocent moon and a
Lover's voice
Sultry and cat-sleepy
Yet sheathing a bright edged dagger

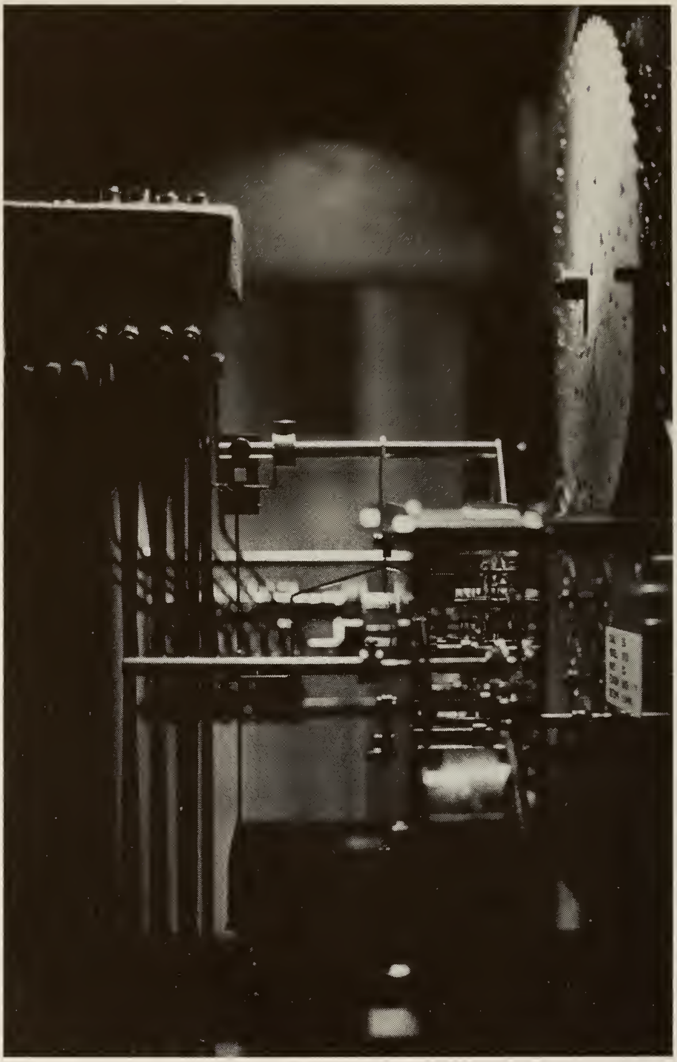
Softly bound and cornered
In her shadowed nest
Siphoned by her dangerous caress
I'm drawn nearer to the flame

Treading the balance between
Distance and obsession
Although I know I'll be punished severely
For occupying heaven

Bobby Myers

Everyday Abstraction
Cindy Intorre

Peeping Tom's Dream
Cindy Intorre



In Working Order
Doug Spinks

"Wine, Mistress?"

Patricia Saunders

I looked around me. The tiny space, barely four feet by three, and the barred walls and ceiling seemed more fit for an animal than a human being. Clean straw covered the floor, and there was a pan of water in one corner. I could see many cells like mine, lining the walls of the large room. They were stacked, each cage four feet high, with a small, locked gate that could be raised and lowered for a door. They were not meant to be entered standing. The occupants of these cells wore, as I did, a sturdy metal collar locked inflexibly around their necks. I had been told that mine bore the symbol of the House of Tasra. We were naked in the cages, to save expense of clothing, and the dry straw prickled and scratched at every movement. I pulled the thin blanket around me and wondered what I was here for.

I heard footsteps approach on the catwalk spanning the room. They stopped with a jangle of keys as the sandaled feet of a guard and a scribe stood before my cage. "Take this one from the kennels and have him washed and combed," the scribe said. "The Mistress wishes to be served in her rooms this evening." He wrote something in the book he carried as the guard nodded. With a swish of robes, the scribe turned and they left the room. I heard the hushed whispers of the others discussing me.

"She picked that one," one said.

"I wish I had been chosen," remarked another. None spoke loudly, of course, fearing the whip of the guard.

I had already seen one beating earlier that day. A slave girl had stolen a pastry from the kitchens, thinking she was alone. A cook walked in on her as she was eating, and sent her to the kennels for punishment. She had been chained to a post, her slender wrist hoisted up above her head, forcing her to stand on the tips of her toes. She hung there beautifully, every blow of the whip bringing tears and soft cries from her. Welts shone red on her smooth back. The guard was not gentle with her, nor was he cruel. He paced each blow evenly, not choosing to vary interval and strength to devastate her, breaking down the emotional barriers she had erected around her, and leaving her intensely vulnerable and helpless, but to give her a very firm reminder of her place under the Master or Mistress. She received ten lashes of a Talusian slave whip. The beating only lasted ten arcs, but I could still hear her weeping in her cage.

It was near the sixth arch when I heard the guard returning for me. He unlocked the kennel and raised the gate. He motioned for me to come out.

"Come on, we haven't got all day. The Mistress wants you in fifty arcs, and you still stink of the pens." A Talusian arc corresponds to a Terran minute, an arch to an hour. There were about thirty Terran minutes left before my appointment with the Mistress, Lady Tasra.

He snapped the leash on my collar as I crawled out of the cage. My hands were braceleted behind me, and I was led impatiently to the baths. Attendants took me from the guard, who unlocked my wrists, throwing the bracelets on a table nearby, the key left in them. The door to the baths was of sturdy wood. It was bound with iron, and fastened with a heavy, locking beam.

While the attendants bathed me, my mind whirled. What would Tasra be like? I wondered why she had chosen me to serve tonight. Surely any one of her other slaves would be more pleasant to look upon than I. Perhaps if I pleased her, I could increase my lot. A softer cell, a warmer blanket, better food, even clothing in the kennels could be had, if one was pleasing. If one was lucky, one could even sleep on the tiles at the foot of the Mistress's couch at night, chained to the slave ring there.

I was dried, and dressed in perfumed slave silk. It was a yellow tunic, with a necklace of red slave beads. A belt of binding fiber completed the outfit. It was suitable for the tying of wrists or ankles, or as a leash or tether for the securing of the slave, should the Master or Mistress desire. My hair was tied back with a yellow ribbon. The bracelets were snapped on my wrists again, this time before my body, and I was led down a smooth-tiled stone corridor by a guard.

We stopped before one of the many doors lining the hallway. The guard knocked three times on the door. A low, melodious voice called "Enter." This was the moment I had been uneasy over since I had been chosen for this evening. My fists clenched unconsciously in the bracelets. The guard opened the door and prodded me in with the end of his whip. "Here he is, Mistress. Bathed and combed." And to me: "You are in the presence of the Mistress, slave." He lashed the back of my knees; I obediently knelt on the tiles.

As I remained on the cool floor, I thought about my choices. I was being given a chance to prove my worth as a pleasure slave. I could return to the fighting pits, where free men and women placed wagers on the outcome of fights to unconsciousness, or to the death between slaves. The sweat, the gore, maiming, all part of the life I could get away from if I only showed I could be a silk slave, intended for the pleasures of my Mistress or Master. Tasra had given me the choice, by choosing me from the fighting stable of her father. All I had to do was serve her well.

I had a good life in the stable; I was strong, and had won many fights. Tasra must have seen me there, veiled and robed as all self-respecting Talusian free women. I had gained much respect there. What kind of respect could I have as the plaything of a woman? Perhaps I should rebel against her. She would probably send me back to the stable where I would still have my dignity, even though my standings in the Pits had been dropped. Once slaves are purchased from a fighting stable, their ratings are dropped if they were bought for non-fighting purposes, or rendered probationary until they re-fight their last rated contest. Ratings are based on survival, and winning fights. A first-ranked fighter can often earn some money from his own fights, and place bets with that money. Some fighting slaves have even been known to purchase their own freedom, although I have never met a former fighter. I had been third in my division, a high rank for a second-season contender.

I slowly raised my eyes from their respectful gaze at the floor. I saw a richly appointed room. The tiles were strewn with costly furs of unknown origin and lustrous colors. The cushions and small, low tables clustered around the room were done in deep reds and golds, accented with blues and silver.

There were many tapestries on the gray stone walls. Some seemed to depict famous battles with the neighboring city-states. Others showed scenes of pleasure gardens, with shapely slaves serving the whims and pleasures of free persons in various intimate ways. One showed a Master having a slave given up to the Slave Death. This one was of a slave being thrown, bound and helpless, to the sewer scavengers, similar to Terran rats. It was thought that scenes of this sort were good for reminding slaves of the danger of not being fully pleasing. Slaves are fully owned, and the death of a slave is of no moment to society. The tapestries were painstakingly woven, and rich with detail. The agony on the slave's face from the pain, and the shame of such a petty death, showed clearly on his upturned face.

The Mistress reclined on a silken couch, surrounded by many large, fringed pillows. Her couch lay on a slightly raised dais, and commanded the center of the room. She wore pleasure robes in a soft rose color, complementing her lustrous auburn hair. Her hair fell in glistening waves, flowing to the soft curve where hip meets thigh. Her robes were translucent, showing hints and promise of the creamy flesh below. I found her beauty almost painful, and wondered if the soft, pampered life of a pleasure slave might not be so bad.

A low table stood beside the couch. I saw a flask of wine on it, the bottle bearing the marks of a city-state to the south. Several heavy, ornate goblets rested near the flask. This, then, would be the moment of decision. If I served her, I would be a pleasure slave, serving the pleasure of whomever the Mistress desired. If I did not, I would risk death, or reduction to the fighting slave I had been.

Tasra pointed to the tiles at her feet. I moved to kneel where she indicated, back on my heels, knees wide, head up, hands resting palm upward on my thighs, in the position of a pleasure slave. "Wine," she said. "If you would choose the life of a pleasure slave, you may find that I can be kind. It is possible to earn your freedom, if you are sufficiently pleasing." She moved elegantly, shifting her position on the couch. "I have many rivals. You can make it easy for me to defeat them. Slaves are rarely taken note of, and are often present at meetings, for the pleasure of those attending. Much may be overheard that is of use to me." She leaned forward to make certain I was paying proper attention, and fixed me with a steely gaze. "Of course, you will be a true pleasure, here as well as there. I am offering you the chance to use not only your body, but your mind in my service. That is not something lightly offered to any slave." She relaxed and leaned back, coolly appraising my body. "Besides, your body is well-formed, and you would make a superb addition to many love gardens. Mind you, I am not an easy Mistress. You will be kept under strict discipline at all times." With a hard stare she said, "Displease me and you will be severely punished."

My mind reeled. The chance of freedom was worth the risk. I admired the planning that was behind using a slave to spy. And as a free man, I had a chance of suing for the hand of such a woman in Free Companionship. Together, a team like that could soon control the commerce in any city. I reached to the table for the flask. I carefully poured the wine to the third ring of the goblet. Extending my arms, I offered the vessel to Tasra, head bowed.

"Wine, Mistress?"

Five To Life

Jamie Burchett

"Matt!" Denise cried. "Come on, we don't have all day, you know!" Matt trudged over to where his fiancee was waiting.

"Now open the truck door for me. You know what I've said about developing good and gentleman-like manners," she reminded.

"Of course, dear," Matt replied.

He opened the door with an exaggerated swoop of his arms. Denise climbed into the pickup, batting her eyes and nodding her head like a princess, as Matt held the door for her. He looked down at her sandaled foot with her perfectly painted pink toenails smiling out.

I wonder if it would crack her toenail polish if I just slammed the hell out of this door right now, he thought, eyeing her foot.

"Okay, Matt, I'm in, dear," she said.

"Of course you are," he said, still staring at the spot where her foot had been moments before. He climbed into the driver's seat and buckled up for the ride.

"Now first of all we have to go to the Briar Patch to pick up that cute little basket of pillows that I saw. Won't that just be darling next to our new couch?" she asked.

"Of course, honey," Matt replied. I'd love to have a basket of pillows handy to stuff into your big fat blabbering mouth, he thought. Matt smiled.

"What are you over there grinning about, sweetheart? Are you thinking about our wedding night? We've only got three more weeks to go!" she said, checking her hair in the visor mirror.

Oh God, three weeks. Where did the last six months go? Matt thought, as he watched a little red sports car speed happily past them. I wonder if it's too late to join a monastery.

"MATT!" Denise screamed. "Hello! Where are you! We were supposed to turn back there at the mall, you big idiot!

You better be glad you have me to lead you along life's path, or you'd be lost forever!" she finished, as she slammed her makeup case shut.

"Oh, I was just thinking . . . uh . . . about . . . uh . . . you," Matt said, trying to smile.

"Ah, aren't you so sweet. I don't deserve you, honey," she replied smiling.

"I know," Matt mumbled under his breath.

She shot him a look to kill, and said, "Now turn around and go back to the turn you missed. I've just got to have that pillow basket." She began to dig in her purse for her brush.

Matt parked the truck on the curb next to the NO PARKING sign so Denise wouldn't have to walk too far. He got out of the truck and walked to the sidewalk.

"Matt!" he heard Denise's muffled voice shouting. "Come open my DOOR!" she said. A couple looking just a little older than Matt and Denise walked by the truck as Denise screamed and pouted. They looked at her and then looked over to see Matt. The young man, holding the girl's hand, could only give Matt a look of pity. Then he turned back to his partner and smiled warmly at her. They huddled closer together and strolled into the mall hand in hand. Matt looked after them and remembered when Denise used to hold his hand. He stood there alone, watching the couple giggle and cuddle as they walked away.

"Are you ever going to get me out of here, because I know that you don't want me to open this door for myself . . . DO YOU?" Denise called through the window of the truck.

"Of course not, dear. I'm so sorry, please forgive me," Matt said flatly as he opened her door. "Now don't slip and break your neck getting out on this curb," he said.

"Oh honey, you are the sweetest kindest man in the whole world for thinking of me, and caring that I don't get hurt," she said to him. She held out her hand for him to take, and assist her out of the truck.

I wonder if she'd be permanently scarred if I yanked her scrawny little arm and threw her stiff ass on the concrete one time, he thought, looking down at the hard sidewalk.

"MATT!" she growled. "Your grip is hurting me, you big brute. I'm going to BRUISE!" He let go of her arm, and allowed his fantasy to float away with it.

"Now come on, we've got important matters to attend to. Quit lollygagging," she said over her shoulder as she walked toward the entrance. Once she reached the double doors of the mall she stopped, and waited, tapping her sandaled toes on the sidewalk. Matt quickly caught up with her and tried to open the door for her. However, he pulled instead of pushed, and ended up going nowhere.

"Oh my God, do you embarrass me on purpose, or were you just born this way?" she said as she pushed the door open for herself, and marched past him. Matt stood there watching her swish her hair from side to side as she prissed and primped through the corridor. He watched the teenage boys at the arcade as they looked her up and down.

Yep, he thought, she's a nice package on the outside . . . just DON'T piss her off, he advised them silently. He looked down at the trash can beside him. A Pepsi can stuck out of the canister, just far enough for Matt to reach. I could nail her poodle-permed head from here, if I wanted to, he pondered. However, he thought about the situation, and all he had at stake, and instead, left the Pepsi can, and ran to catch up with her.

She'd reached the entrance to the Briar Patch by this time, and stood waiting.

Denise glared at him. "Now come along with me, and DO NOT touch anything. God forbid your clumsy construction worker hands break something," she chided. "You did get your paycheck cashed yesterday, right?" she asked.

Matt felt for his wallet. "Yes, hon', I've got plenty of cash," he said.

"Good, then go ahead and give me forty-five dollars for the cute little basket over there," he said.

"Forty bucks for a basket of damn pillows?" he asked. "Those pillows better be filled with gold or something," he said.

"Oh God," Denise sighed, as she furiously twisted a piece of her dark brown hair. She gave him the look that meant "You have absolutely no idea of what you are talking about," and spun around on her heel to take care of the necessary business.

Matt looked around him; the salesclerk was peering at them over the cash register. He got out his wallet and handed her the entire wad of cash.

"Here's two hundred and sixty-eight dollars. Why don't you go buy a matching rug or something," he said as he surrendered his week's pay.

"Oh ha ha," she said. "Maybe if you'd pay more attention to our new house you'd know that I already bought a new rug when I bought the nursery furniture, dear. "Besides, we have to give one hundred seventy-five dollars to our wedding photographer on Monday, so we can't just blow money like you suggest." She picked up the forty-five dollar basket and marched to the counter. Matt walked out to the main corridor to wait on the benches by the fountain.

He gazed into the bubbling water next to him and grinned. Denise can't swim. I wonder how deep this fountain is, he thought, as he dipped his hand in the cool clear water. It smelled like strong chlorine, just as the swimming pool had smelled the day he'd met Denise.

Matt had shown up at the pool party with his friends Gary and David. He'd intended to catch a good tan, drink some beer, and have a good time. He hadn't intended to meet the girl of his dreams. Yet when Denise Emmons walked into the yard in her red bikini with a brilliant colored scarf wrapped around her hips, he knew he'd never seen a prettier girl. She was wearing red sandals to match her bathing suit, and her toenails were polished in a rosy shade to coordinate her entire look. Matt soaked in her every move and gesture, and after only minutes, he'd introduced himself. He fell deeper and deeper under her spell as they talked about school and friends. They sat on the steps in the shallow end of the pool, because Denise didn't want to get her hair wet. He learned months later that she really could not swim and had used her hair as an excuse. By the end of the evening the beautiful brunette had Matt twisted tightly around her finger as she teased him about his clumsy habits.

"I like a man who isn't polished to a glossy shine. You're like a piece of clay just waiting to take shape," she'd said at the end of the evening as she petted his rough, calloused hand.

"Well, you can mold me any way you want, Denise," Matt had said as he smiled and drew her closer to him. They kissed the sweetest kiss, and now as Matt pulled his hand from the bubbling fountain water and rubbed his callouses, he thought about how sweet the kisses, the words, the touches, had been those five years ago. It had been so different then.

He looked up at the skylight, wondering what could possibly be taking his fiancee so long in the store. The bright sunlight cleared his thoughts, and he saw the last five years with absolute clarity. Then he moved into the foggy thoughts of the last two months. It had been flying by so fast! He thought about the night at his parents' house when they were alone. He thought about the dismayed look on Denise's face when she'd said, "Matt, I'm pregnant." Then he saw himself on one knee proposing to Denise, and she, looking only at the diamond on her finger as she said "Yes." His eyes watered a little, only a little, as he thought about the girl he'd fallen in love with. The babe in the red bikini.

"HELLO!" The voice of his fiancee startled him back to reality. "Where are you, Matt? Earth to Matty!" she teased. He looked down from the skylight and met her eyes.

"Why are your eyes watering, Matt?" she asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking about somebody I used to know," he said without looking at her.

She tossed her hair with a flip of her head and said, "Oh, probably some girl, huh?" He didn't answer her as he turned away and began walking.

"Hey, wait up, you're not leaving me by myself, mister!" she cried. He stopped and waited as she quickly padded her way up to where he was standing. Matt looked down at her, hoping to see the girl in the red swimsuit, but instead found his fiancee's impatient blue eyes staring up at him.

"Can we go now?" she asked. "You know we still have to go to House World to look for a kitchen sink faucet."

"Of course, dear," he said looking at his shoes.

"Look at me when you speak to me please, dear," she reminded. "Don't forget your manners." She walked on in front of him, as he trod along by himself. She reached the double doors again, and waited for him to try once again. This time he reached for the door and pushed, holding his breath. The door swung wide open. and Denise walked over the threshold. She almost made it all the way over, when the toe of her sandal caught on the tile. She lunged forward, tripped for about three steps, dropped the basket of pillows on the ground and fell. She landed on the pillows, and grunted with a loud "UMF!" She caught herself with her hands. Her long wavy hair had also been thrown forward and now covered her face. She did not move, but stayed in that position for a minute or two hiding behind her hair. Matt rushed over to her to help her to her feet.

"Oh, God , Denise, are you . . . is the baby . . . are ya all right?" Matt said frantically. Denise was trembling from anger and humiliation.

"Matthew Mahany! You tripped me! You made me fall!" she screamed as she threw his hands off her and rose by herself.

"No I didn't trip you, why would I trip you?" he asked.

"I don't know, don't care, just pick up the pillows and get me . . . us, to the truck," she cried, as her face turned red.

Once Matt had decided that everything was all right, he busily picked up the colored pillows and escorted his bride to the truck. He grinned slightly as he thought about Denise lying helpless on the floor in front of him. As he did, an older man with a big gray beard, who'd seen the whole event, grinned back as if to console him.

"Welcome to prison," he whispered to him, once Denise was behind the closed truck door.

"Huh?" questioned Matt, looking at the old man.

"Don't forget once you're in, it's a life sentence," he advised, looking over his shoulder. Matt smiled politely at the old man. As he turned towards the truck he heard a woman yell, "Herbert, where are you? Get over here, I need some help!" Matt spun around to see the old man with the beard shuffling over to help his elderly wife carry some shopping bags. Matt smiled in the man's direction, and grimly turned back to Denise.

He climbed in beside her, and started the truck.

"Where to, warden?" he asked. She glared over at him.

"Oh real funny, Matt. Just shut up and take me home," she said, looking down at her bloody knees.

"You should be shot for letting me fall like that, Matt Mahany!" she said as she began to cry.

"Why shoot me, Denise? I'm already serving a life sentence."

Earth Shaking Vibrations

The contractor measures paces
around the foundation’s outline
with wooden stakes and balls of string;
staying true to design.

The white truck’s revolving belly
spits out continuous cement,
over mounds of shoveled, packed dirt
to form a floor to rent.

The two by four framework rises
with rat-a-tat races.
A trio of varied roof tops
will designate inner spaces.

As carpenters raise the main roof,
planks stand straight and tall.
Two triangular roofs now drop
down in measured fall.

A palm tree acts as sentinel,
as final work is done.
I see sunlit trees within
the roof's wooden skeleton.

Shirtless workmen lay shingles
deftly with light footsteps.
“OK if I take photos of your work?”
“Sure,” one answers, flexing biceps.

Over morning coffee I ponder
gaps in my myrtle screen
which I must fill with oleander,
so I remain unseen.

The wild geese cackle overhead.
        Cardinal, jay, and wren
have lost favorite perching places
        and nests to building men.

As leaves and branches fly about,
        the birds scream and skitter;
in air above the decimated ground
        is a haze of cluttered litter.

I turn from the senseless man-made jumble
        to my garden for peace; and discover
my fuchsia azaleas blooming in sequence,
        one after another.

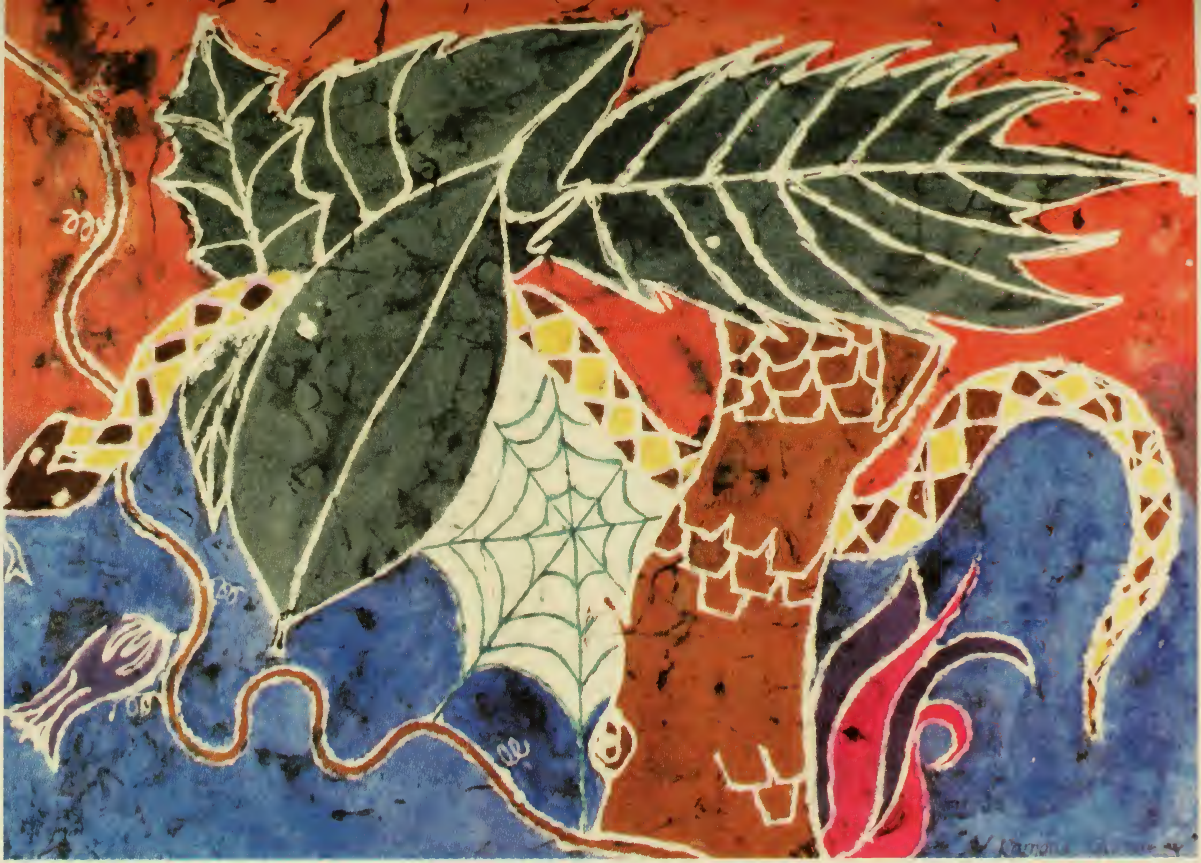
Rachel McReynolds Brown

Spring Fever

Siren cricket you are my foe
crooning spring songs outside the window.
Longing to drink the lively air,
I sit inside and blankly stare

at the assigned pages before me.

Michael Walker



Rain Forest
Ramona Michelle Singleton

Seasons

Springtime: sweet-scented season . . .
Bee Boys buzzing busily as
Girl flowers blossom into beauty.
I, King Bee, and she, Queen Clover,
Made honey and it was magical.

Summertime: hot and humid . . .
Sweating, she seeks shade while
I, tall strong oak
Let her lie in my shadow
to cool off and it was arrogant.

Fall: crisp, colorful changes . . .
Manly oaks lose their foliage as
Womanly temperatures rise and fall.
I, the oak, was bare to the world while
she temperamentally controlled the day and it was unmerciful.

Winter: long, cold, infertile season . . .
I, the bear, hibernate—dormant
in refuge from the cold while
She, the game bird, migrates to warmth
Away from home and it is seasonal.

William B. Deaver, Jr.

Ballerinas

Leigh Calhoun

I recall those paper-thin walls in the dormitory of my college years. They were painted with pale, mint green paint that was flaking off all above by my bed, revealing the putrid yellow underneath it. I would lie there at night, peeling the paint around where it had already started, and listen. She lived next door. I could hear her come in late every night, usually not alone. She was always giggling, giggling that incessant giggle that made me pick at the paint harder and harder. Sometimes I'd get that green paint stuck under my fingernail and flinch as it cut into my skin. And the moaning. I'd hear this deep, breathy moan, but not from her . . . just some nonresidential voice which varied on each occasion. Moan, giggle, moan, moan, giggle, on and on, piercing my ears, for hours. Then, finally, I would hear the springs of her bed stop squeaking and her door open. He'd go to the bathroom. I lived right across the hall from it, and would wait to hear the toilet flush. Seconds later, her door would slam shut. Silence.

I didn't know her very well, only to say hello. She was one of those girls who whisked by your open door, waving in as she rushed off to whatever she did all day and all night . . . always in a hurry. Her appearance always perfect, makeup always on, and dressed like one of those fashion models I looked at in my magazines. I sometimes tried to see myself walking sprightly down the checkerboard tiled hall on the arm of some beautiful man who would sweep me into my room and throw me down, violating me, invading me, loving me. But my hair was boxed at my ears, and my iron remained tucked away in the back of my closet.

I often think of her still. I try to recall what she was like before that agonizing month when the vivacity, the life was sucked out of her . . . sucked out of me. It all started one rainy Saturday. I was attempting to study for my Japanese exam but would periodically let my eyes roam aimlessly all over my room. I only had one window. I never closed it because of how stuffy it would get in that little cubicle I called home. The rain tapped lightly on the sill. My mother used to tell me that the raindrops were little ballerinas performing just for me. For some reason, that made me feel important then. I followed the green wall over to my dresser and was admiring the rotten plastic doll with movable limbs and frayed hair that I had picked up at a garage sale when I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I was almost scared to stare at my chunky unsunned face with that ungodly haircut, but my eyes stuck. I could only see down to my shoulders, but God, what hulking shoulders! I didn't eat that much, but I could see every little bite I took. Oh well, I thought, some people just don't have that "Special K" figure. I knew I needed to study, but all these menial distractions . . . .

"Only three more minutes," she said, obviously talking on the phone. She was always on the phone.

"Yes, I know . . . all right I said, I promise . . . ."

There was a long pause. I picked away at a peeling spot.

"One more minute . . . are you sure these things work?"

Another pause. Pick. Pick.

"Thank God! . . . see I told you, nothing to worry about . . . O.K." A laugh. "I'll call you this weekend. Tell everyone I said hello . . . all right, bye-bye."

I wondered what the hell she was talking about. I had made a yellow dinosaur on the wall, eating a clump of yellow grass.

"Oh shit! Oh shit!" she yelled. I heard some object bash into my wall and jerked away from the dinosaur. "Oh shit!"

I didn't hear her anymore. She never went out, and she never came in. Her television stayed on twenty-four hours a day. I would hear her bed squeak once in a while . . . guess she was turning over. Every day or so she would come out to take a shower. No makeup and greasy hair. I listened intently all the time to find out what was going on, but she seemed relentless in her silence. Her phone would always ring twice, and then, "Hey, you reached my room, but I'm not talking. Just leave a message all right? Bye." Then a long beep. I now had a dominion of dinosaurs grazing on my wall . . . they listened, too.

Weeks went by, as she stayed in her room. I knew she wasn't going to class. I knew. Three or four of her friends, at least I guess they were her friends, had knocked on her door. No answer. They'd wait about a minute, and then I'd hear their footsteps tapping down the tiled hallway. But from her room came nothing but that omnipresent noise out of her television. Jumbled words just low enough that I couldn't distinguish what show she was watching. I think she was starving. The few times she did leave her room, I'd hear her trudging back up the stairs rattling a bag of crackers from the vending machine downstairs. I thought maybe I'd call her one day and offer her dinner. After all, I was her neighbor.

I waited for the answering machine to go through its monotonous message and then, "Hi, this is Jen next door and I was just wondering if you'd like dinner. Just knock on the wall if you would and I'll order out for both of us. Bye."

I waited for the knock, as I sculpted out a bird high up on the wall. I listened to my clock ticking, ticking, ticking, until finally, a frail knock echoed through the hollow wall. I ordered out for pizza . . . pineapple and mushrooms. When it got there, I walked over to her room. I had never been inside before, and entered slowly, not knowing what I would see.

It was dark. There was a small lamp in the corner with a sheet thrown over it, allowing only a glowing mass of cloth to be seen. It was a sickening hot with her window closed, but she was underneath a flannel blanket, bundled up to her neck. Only a slight picture of her face could be seen emerging from the bundle, flashing with sudden bursts of light radiating from the television screen, but I could tell she had dark circles under the eyes which seemed to sink back into her head. She was pale, and stared into a corner across the room, which was suffocated by a huge pile of dirty laundry. Her lips were slightly apart, leaving a small slit for her breath to come and go. Her hair had been pulled back with a rubber band, but limp strands hung into her face and around her ears. I could see her foot twitching under the cover, while the rest of her body remained motionless. It was the only sign of life I could find.

"Why did you offer me dinner?" she asked, gazing firmly on the pile.

"Well, I just get tired of eating alone sometimes, and, umm, well, I could hear your television on and thought . . . "

"And thought I'd been in my room for the past two weeks and needed something to eat?" she interjected with a sudden ominous glare straight through my eyes.

"Well, I just thought . . . "

"You let me tell you one thing, Jen, I'm no charity case and I don't need anything from you or anybody else. Do you hear me?" she screamed. "Now, you can just take your pizza and get out . . . I'm no charity," her voice lowering as she turned back to her study of the laundry. I picked up only a piece and left the rest with her.

She was crying. The dinosaurs and I could hear her. Then I heard the bed squeak. I knew she was eating the pizza. I was glad, even if she had been a bitch.

The television stopped early the next Saturday morning. It woke me up. I pressed my ear up against the dinosaur. I heard a zipper zip and seconds later the door open and close. I guessed she was going home for the weekend. My day was lonely. I thought about going for a walk, but I only made it to the vending machine downstairs, where I decided to try some of those crackers she always ate. I missed having her mystery on the other side of the wall. Even lost interest in the dinosaurs as they rounded over the desolate savanna of green. I had just settled down to take a nap when I heard those slow footsteps up the stairwell. I knew they were hers; I had grown accustomed to listening for them. Only they were much slower, with pauses after every two or three. Filled with interest. I rose to see if there was anything wrong. I peered out of my door, which was always open, to see a pathetic form of a girl hobbling to her door. I remained silent as I watched her fumbling for her keys in her jeans pocket. As she lifted her shirt out of the way, I could see that her button-fly jeans were undone halfway. How odd, I thought to myself. Intently trying to get into her room, she didn't see me standing there, fixated on her every move. She disappeared and gently closed the door behind her.

I fell back on my bed, creating a new character on my wall, and listened. She was crying again. There was a squeaking of the bed that I hadn't heard before . . . almost as if she were rocking back and forth, back and forth. And it wasn't crying; she was sobbing . . . a sobbing like I had never heard before. Almost like a hurt animal. It made me sick to listen. For the first time, I didn't want to listen. But, just like the television, she was relentless in annoying the hell out of me.

"I did it," I heard her voice say over the phone. "Well, I told Joni and Blake . . . "

A long pause. Pick. Pick.

"I had to tell someone. I can't go through this by myself . . . , " she said painfully over the phone. I could tell she had pulled the phone over to her bedside because her voice was nearer to the wall. The yellow clouds were now rolling overhead. "I'm glad to know that your reputation is all that you're concerned about." Her voice continued but was trampled by the idle chatter of people in the hallway. God, I thought, why don't they shut up? I can't hear! I ran and slammed my door, jumping back onto my bed and pushing my head through the yellow grass.

"I loved you . . . " The phone slammed. Sobbing.

That was enough. I wanted to know exactly what was going on, and I wanted to know right then. I wanted to go over to her room and shake it out of her, shake out the sobbing. One of my dinosaurs turned into an old man with a walking stick. Her door opened. I heard her coughing as she struggled to the bathroom. I went out into the hallway to try to help, I guess, but almost ran into her. I'll never forget her face. It personified pain with every feature blank and empty. Her eyes were nearly swollen shut as she squinted to see me. Her lips were dry and pursed, holding the wet strain of mucus running from her nose. She was wearing a huge T-shirt which hung to her knees, a little shorter in front than in back.

"Can I help you?" I asked shyly, my feet frozen to the floor, my eyes frozen to her face.

"You can get, out of, my way," she said breathlessly. "Can't you see I'm sick?"

I moved slowly out of her way as she pushed on toward the bathroom. I heard her heaving, dry heaving. The toilet flushed. God, if I had only known then.

For the next four days, I stayed home. I didn't go to class. I was sucked into the wall, sucked into her. I listened to her moaning, the slow creaking of the springs, the television, the occasional opening of the door, and the indolent haunting shuffles of her socked feet as she passed by my door to the bathroom. Back and forth. Back and forth. Heaving. Peeing. Flushing. By day four, I was insane. My dinosaurs and the old man and the clouds and the birds were all gone. All I had was a huge blob of yellow, violating me, invading me. That horrible yellow. I could smell it and taste it. I even slept with it. The little flecks of paint were unbudgeable from my bed, dwelling permanently in my sheets. And if that wasn't enough, there were mountains being erected all underneath my bed, collecting from my artistic endeavors. It was thick, and coming from every direction like a disease. Knock . . . Knock.

"Help me," she said softly with tears streaming down her face as she wrapped her arm around her waist. "I have to get, to go back, please."

She looked up at me, and I saw her eyes again. She held out her other hand to me, holding a pamphlet with directions to the clinic. I reached inside and grabbed my keys from the dresser. I think she would have collapsed if I hadn't gotten underneath her arm and held her as we struggled down the stairs. It was only a forty-five minute drive, but the little yellow lines seemed to multiply in front of us on the idle Wednesday afternoon.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked as I gazed at the road ahead.

“I promised, I wouldn’t, tell anybody,” she said, pushing every syllable from her lungs.

“I’m not anyone . . . I’m your next door neighbor,” I argued. There was no reply for countless yellow lines.

“Thank you,” she exhaled, finally.

I can honestly say that I had never seen anything so pitiful in my whole life. This beautiful girl untouchable, so ugly.

“Oh shit,” she mumbled. I glanced over to see a red pool between her legs, on her legs, on her hand which she had put between them. She held her hand up in the air and stared at the blood, stared at her blood.

“Oh my God, you’re hemorrhaging,” I cried as my foot instinctively pressed the accelerator to the floor.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” she said, over and over and over, sobbing with heavy breaths, gasping for air.

I’ll never forget pulling up to the clinic and slamming on brakes. Her head jerked forward with an agonizing grunt of pain. I jumped out and screamed at a nurse taking a cigarette break outside the rear door.

“Help us!” I cried. “She’s bleeding!”

I stared at my lap, holding a magazine, trying not to listen to the screams coming from the back. It was her. They would taper off and then come again in full force, tearing at my stomach, ripping at my throat. My foot tapped firmly at the country blue carpet. I flipped the pages rapidly just catching glimpses of colors and print. I thought of the yellow. I threw the magazine down and rushed to the front desk.

“Let me in there!” I demanded. She needed someone, and I was all she had.

“I’m sorry,” the nurse said with an ignorant smile on her face. " Even family members are not allowed back during the procedure."

“Procedure?” I questioned with my eyes squinting in bewilderment. “She’s already had the procedure.”

"I'm sorry, but the procedure was incomplete."

"Incomplete? How can you fuck up something like that! And why didn't you put her to sleep?"

"I'm sorry, but the fee only covers one anesthetic," with that coddling look on her face. "Now, would you please take your seat. We'll call you as soon as you can go back. "

I returned to my seat and waited. Stared out the window. Scratched at the varnish on my chair's arm. Tapped the carpet. Thought of the yellow. Her screaming had stopped. I watched as the doctor appeared at the front desk and handed the nurse a file. He leaned in to her and said something that I couldn't hear. She looked up from her work and said something into his cheek; they both looked in my direction. I grabbed both arms of my chair, stood straight, and walked toward him with my teeth clenched and my fists balled at my sides.

"Can I see her now?"

"She's resting now," said the doctor. "She'll need you to help her get dressed in a few minutes. For now, I'm giving you her prescriptions. Please get them filled for her. She'll be in a lot of pain for the next forty-eight hours or so.

"No more than she's been in for the past four days, you bastard," I said. I pushed him aside and walked back looking for her. She was lying in a dark room with wet rags across her forehead. Sobbing. Mumbling. I went to take her hand, but she flinched and strained her eyes to see me.

"It's all right," I said, reaching for her hand again. "It's just me."

"Hundred and three," she said. I assumed that meant her fever.

"You're going to be all right now. They fixed it."

"Held me down," she said in broken breaths, tears rolling onto the tissue paper covering the table. "Two nurses. Fat bitches."

"I know, but you're OK now . . . it's over." I tried to reassure her but could see I was doing no good.

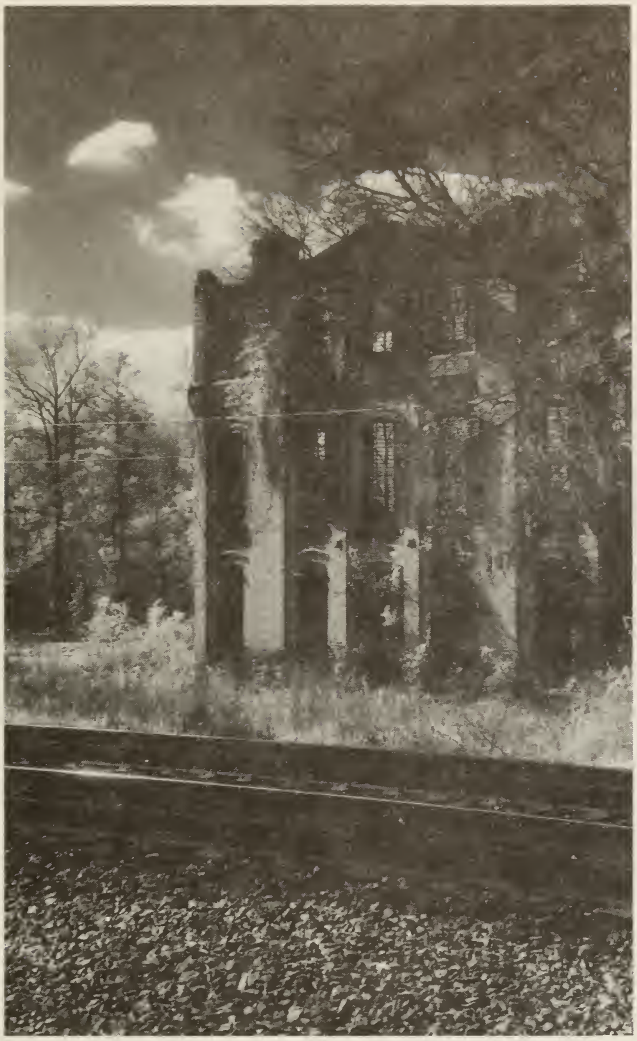
"They're coming back," she cried, her voice suddenly louder. "They're coming back!"

"No, they're gone now. They're not going to hurt you anymore." There was a long pause as I listened to her heavy breathing as her gown, open down the front, gaped open and closed, open and closed. Her head was tilted slightly in my direction but she never looked at me. She was looking at nothing. Finally.

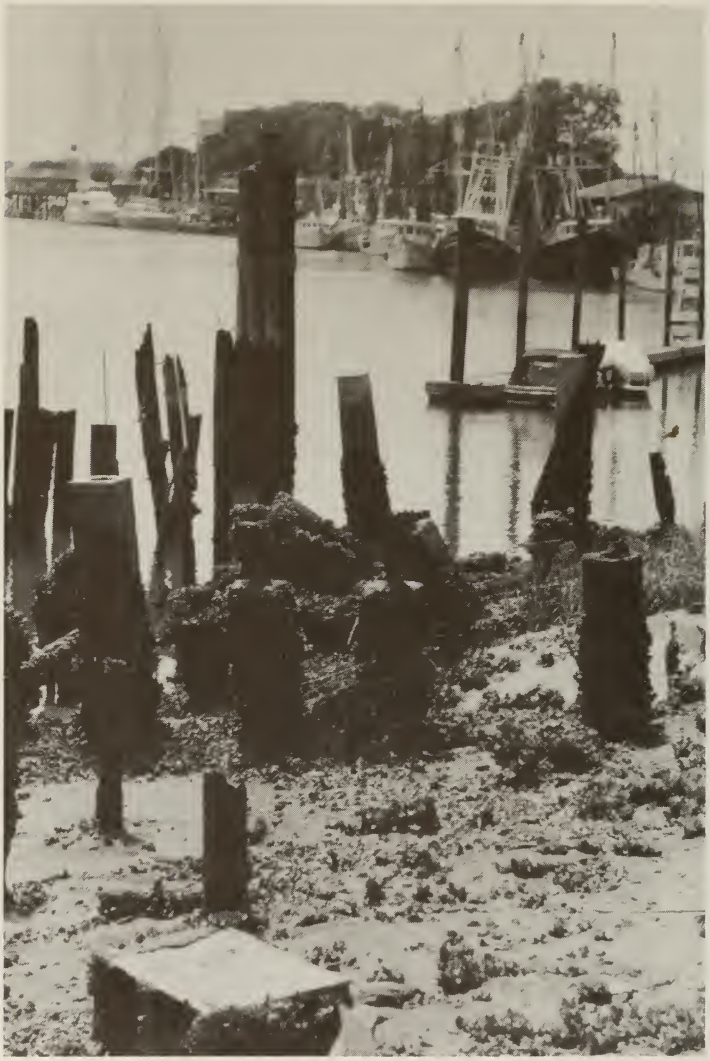
"My baby," she whispered as she closed her eyes and squeezed her tears through her eyelashes.

Her whisper haunts me still.

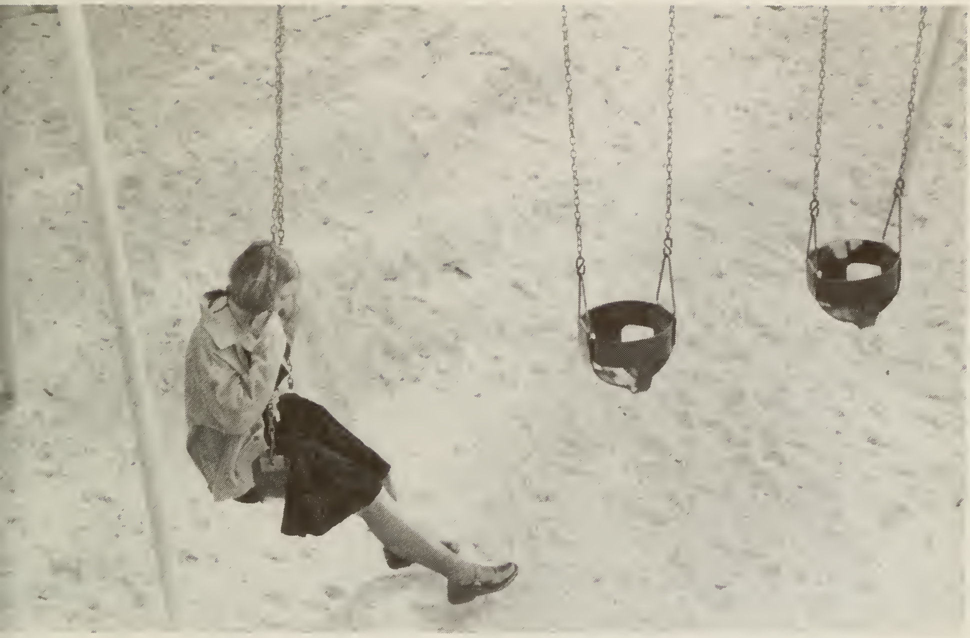
The Calculating Mistress
Jennifer Cohen



Haunted Building
Robert Trimm



Isle of Hope
Gabriele Hauck



You Took a Part of Me
Keith Langston

Age to Age

My life at times must yield its plan to age;
To others in a curtsy I must bend.
And I must read from someone else's page.

In childhood I see elders take the stage:
An older father, crippled aunt to tend;
My life at times must yield its plan to age.

To move a table, chest or bed I wage
A losing war—no change can I defend,
And I must read from someone else's page.

Grown, a tangled vacuum cord brings rage
As by my tiny children's cries I'm penned;
My life at times must yield its plan to age.

As children leave, my parent I engage
Returning: no time for lunch with husband-friend;
And I must read from someone else's page.

When I am old I must myself assuage
As I on children's arms or minds depend.
My life at times must yield its plan to age,
And I must read from someone else's page.

Jean O. Hattle

From “A Forgotten Year”
November , 1993

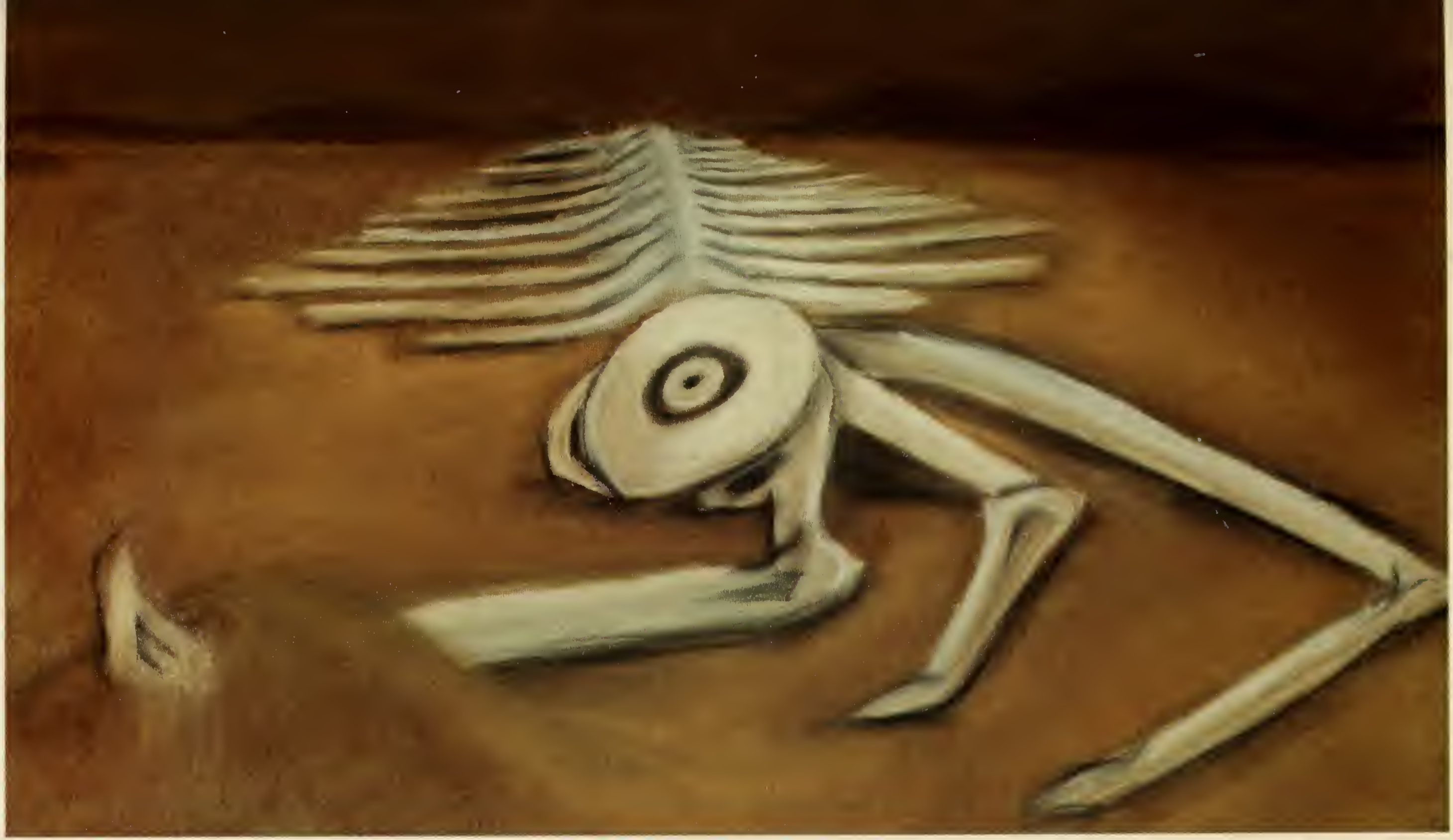
The stars are dirty, like the air,
In the gentle blowing stink
Which fills the highways,
Interstates, back-lanes of garbage-lined walls,
Sidewalks and by-ways,
Merge lanes . . .
And all he wants is a bite to eat,
A scalding shower
And the change from the fat, leather purse
Under the arm of some disdainful bitch.
“They don’t even look at me
As they tell me ‘No.’
Just walk on by,
As would I
Were I in golden boots.”

Forrest Jackson

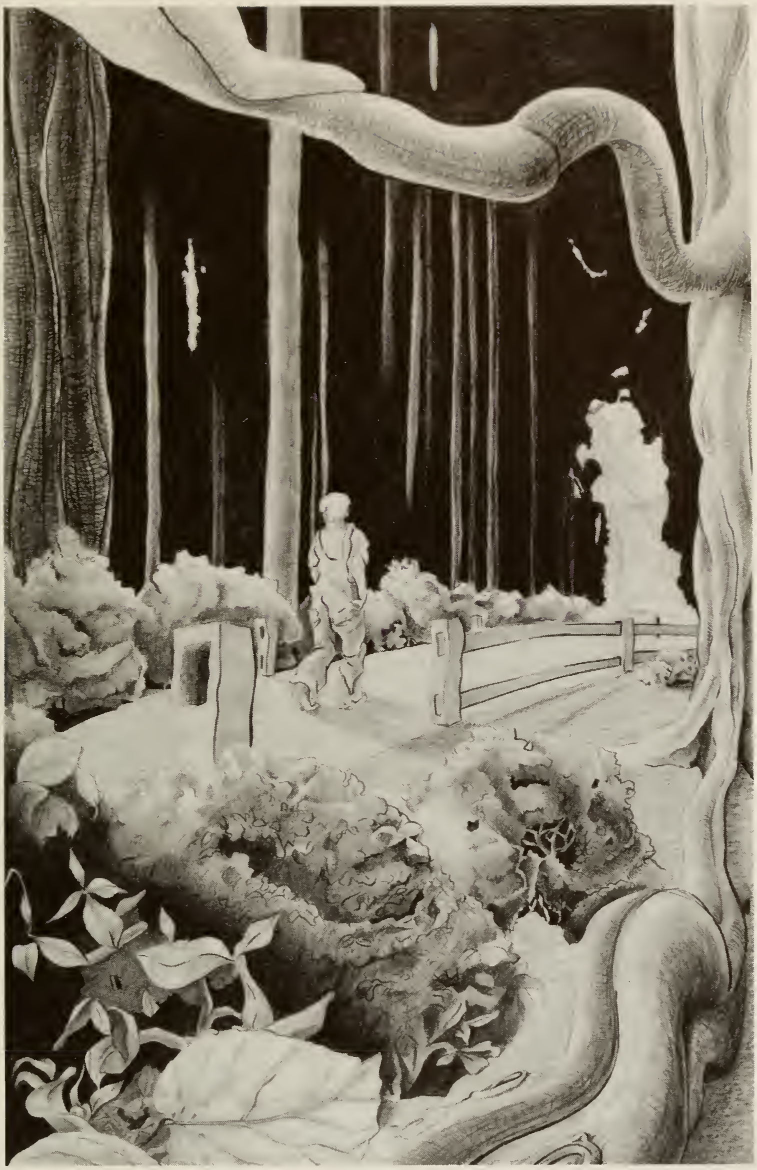
December 22

The memories of madmen remain
fingerpainted down the walls of history,
dribbling globs of clotted red
and bruised, murky purple.
The serpent in the garden has built wax wings
and constructed a plan for escape
despite Simian chattering,
frantic from the trees,
bemoaning the impossibility of flight.
Disappointed to learn that Quetzalcoatl
was just a jailbreak,
Mankind sheds its eyecaps of stone
only to grow new ones of steel
and scuttles like a cunning little lizard
through the fingers of God.

Shawna Silverman



Mark Christ
Les Mosley



Walking
Shawn Kelshaw

Pepsi-Cola Hits the Spot

Thomas Manchester

I began practicing ophthalmology in Atlanta in 1952, when I became the assistant to an eye physician, Dr. Ferdinand Phinizy Calhoun, and his son, Dr. Phinizy Calhoun, Jr. Most of the time I merely performed preliminary examinations on the patients, then instilled eyedrops to dilate the pupils for the older doctors. They were popular and stayed busy examining normal patients. They had no time for weird cases; those cases were referred to me.

One sweltering June day, the electric fan humming back and forth on my desk had nearly put me to sleep. Marilyn, starched and sterile, stepped into my cubicle and announced, "Dr. Manchester, this woman doesn't make sense."

At last, maybe I had a patient of my own. So far that day, the only thing which I had examined was my fingernails.

I put down my pipe and picked up the telephone, then cleared my throat and spoke in my most professional voice, "Good morning, I am Dr. Manchester. May I help you?"

For a long time there was no answer to my query. Finally, a woman's voice answered haltingly. "He thinks he can see. He wants you goddamned doctors out here."

My poise was quickly dissolved. "Who is this you are talking about, please?"

"Oh, uh, hell, it's John. John Wingfield." That is all she said, and then I could hear someone walking away from the telephone. The line was silent.

Marilyn, on her own initiative, always monitored my telephone conversations, and in a matter of seconds she handed me the record of a patient named John Wingfield, Ph.D. I studied it with interest.

Dr. Wingfield had been examined two years previously, and was nearly blind at that time because of cataracts. He had refused to undergo cataract surgery because he was a Christian Scientist. He was eighty-two, and a stroke had left him in a wheelchair. Someone had written on his chart: “This poor man might be less of a Christian Scientist and more of a realist if his wife weren’t there at his side all the time. She waits on him hand and foot. He has little motivation for undergoing an operation.”

“Who in the world was that woman we talked to?” I asked.

It was uncanny how Marilyn seemed to remember all of the patients and their families. She had been with Dr. Calhoun for twenty-three years. “I’ll bet she is Mrs. Wingfield. Her voice sounded familiar, but that language! I sure don’t remember that.” Then without further ado, Marilyn turned about-face, and went to fetch my shiny new doctor’s bag.

I thanked Marilyn, and she promised to explain to my associates about the necessity for me to make a house call. I held my head high as I walked to the elevator. I reached the ground floor and strolled to my yellow convertible Volkswagen, swinging my doctor’s bag at my side. The sun was setting as I drove to Brookwood Hills. The address was #30 Parkview Drive. There was not a cloud in the sky.

It was an established residential neighborhood with sidewalks and bent hundred-year-old willow oaks lining the streets. The house number was on the mailbox, which tilted slightly. It was a two-story cold, gray stone house. I pulled up in the driveway, then took a minute to relight my pipe and to smooth down my mustache. Mother had told me that certain things would make me look older and more mature. I appraised my image in the rearview mirror, then picked up my bag, got out of the car, and walked up the front walk humming “Love Me Tender.”

There was a big mossy tree branch which had fallen across the front steps. I jumped over it and went up the steps two at a time. On the dark door was the head of a griffin adorning the knocker. I grasped it, then raised the heavy thing and let it fall. The loud noise seemed to echo among the trees of the quiet neighborhood, and I stepped back in surprise.

I paced and looked up at the windows as I waited and waited. The house looked dark inside.

Finally, someone released the locks and seemed to pull on the door a long time before it became unstuck and swung back. I was wearing my most intelligent professional expression, but I lost my composure and probably showed it when I looked at the woman who confronted me. Her small thin body was outlined against the shadowy interior of the house. Her stockings hung down around her ankles; her hair was disheveled and clotted in places. She had the open mouth and stunned expression I had seen on the faces of patients with senile psychosis when I was in medical school. A sickening odor brought to mind memories of terminal disease, gangrene, or cachexia.

She stared at me and said only four words: “Shit. He’s back there.”

Then she turned and walked away.

One light bulb shone from back in the house somewhere. There was dust all over, and stacks of old newspapers in such abundance that there was hardly space to walk around. There were three cats underfoot, and a bowl of cat food, which had spilled over onto the rug. I searched around in the semi-darkness, hoping not to step in any feces. I found my patient in a wheelchair, sitting in a dark corner, and facing a wall.

“Is that you, doctor?” he said. “I appreciate so much your coming this afternoon.” I turned his wheelchair around and he stretched his hand out toward my voice, as I swallowed and said, “Yes, it’s me. Dr. Calhoun asked me to come.” He shook my hand. “You came up on my blind side.” Then he smiled and turned to look at me with his right eye. “It’s a miracle! I can see again.” His face was pale and there was an open wound across his right temple about five centimeters long. There was dried blood all over the side of his face and down his shirt. The most remarkable thing to me was the appearance of his eyes.

The left eye was chalky and expressionless. It looked as if it had been marbleized. Its pupil was dilated and the lens behind it was opaque. The difference in the two eyes was surprising. The right eye, beneath the ugly wound in the temple, was bright and shiny. The cornea was clear and the pupil was entirely free of any cataract! I sat down on a stack of newspapers and asked the patient to tell me what happened. His wife was nowhere in sight.

"Emily is embarrassed about this. She doesn't tolerate having nurses around. So, as a consequence, she's had to do everything for me, night and day. For some time now, I've been so blind that I could only see light. And now this miracle has come."

He clutched the wheelchair with his trembling hands, leaned forward, and whispered. "Emily has become very fractious, and quick to anger. When I asked her to check the stove this morning, she flared up and said it was goddamn all the way turned off. I insisted that I could smell the gas, and she cursed again, and threw a bottle at me. Doctor, let me assure you that this is so unlike Emily. She is the sweetest most gentle person in the whole world. But lately, she's just not been herself."

"That's a nasty wound in your temple," I said. "Is that where it struck you?"

"Yes. But the most amazing thing happened! My vision became better immediately! I can see again! Not well, of course, but with this right eye, I can count my fingers and I can tell colors. It's like a miracle all right."

I cleaned the wound and applied a bandage to Dr. Wingfield's temple. Next I examined his eyes thoroughly and found that the cataract in the right eye had been dislocated from its normal position behind the pupil. It was floating freely back in the vitreous, and it looked like a shirt button as it drifted down below the line of sight deep inside the eye. It moved each time the eye moved.

I rested my hand on his shoulder. "It's a miracle. Your wife did you a big favor when she threw that bottle. The blow to your temple jarred the cataract back out of the way of your pupil, and the effect resembles what happens when surgery has been performed and the cataract has been removed."

"I understand exactly what happened now," said the patient. "I have read quite a bit about cataracts. That is, in the good old days, when I read all the time."

"I'll have a pleasant surprise for you tomorrow," I said, "if you will come to my office. It will seem like a second miracle!"

He shook his head slowly. "My wife has not been well, and with me in this wheelchair, it's just impossible to get down to your office. If I come in an ambulance, she might be left here at the house alone."

I explained that I could arrange for them both to come by ambulance. He would have to lie on a stretcher, and his wife could be there at his side for the whole trip. This would be very easy and pleasant. I asked him if he thought that Mrs. Wingfield would be willing to cooperate, and come along with him.

"She will come, I am sure," he said. He did not hesitate. "She always does exactly what I tell her to do."

What could I say? I hoped that he was right.

Dr. and Mrs. Wingfield arrived at Dr. Calhoun's office at eleven the next morning. Dr. Wingfield had on a coat and tie, and looked presentable, except for many stains on his clothing. They both reeked of spoiled food and improper hygiene.

Mrs. Wingfield was wearing the same disreputable clothing she had worn the day before. She was also wearing the same familiar, shocked, stupid expression which had impressed me then. She showed no recognition when she stared at me. She said nothing as she stood beside her husband and held his hand. She would not even let go or move out of the way when an assistant came to prop him up in a sitting position on the stretcher.

As I examined the eyes I explained the situation. “Normally there is a clear lens in the pupil to focus things on the retina. When that lens becomes cloudy, we call it a cataract. I am sure that you know all of this.”

He agreed, so I continued. “A hundred years ago, surgeons used a flat knife, and went inside the eye, and pushed the cloudy lens backward out of the pupil. The end result resembled your right eye. Now, all you need is a strong lens in your spectacles to take the place of that dislocated lens. These cataract glasses have to be very strong to do the focusing,” I said as I placed a pair of heavy trial spectacles on Dr. Wingfield’s face.

“My God,” he said, “I see clearly! Even that bottom line on the chart!”

He smiled at Mrs. Wingfield. “You see, Emily, I told you everything would be all right!” Her face was happy for a moment maybe, and then her blank expression took over again.

Dr. Wingfield wore the temporary spectacles when he rode home in the ambulance. His wife sat at his side and clutched his hand when we saw them off.

A week later I went by the optician's and picked up the new permanent glasses for Dr. Wingfield. The sun was high on a Saturday morning when I drove back to #30 Park View drive. The mailbox was straight, and the big tree limb was gone. The grass had been cut and the walk edged. I moved the griffin knocker gently and the door swung wide.

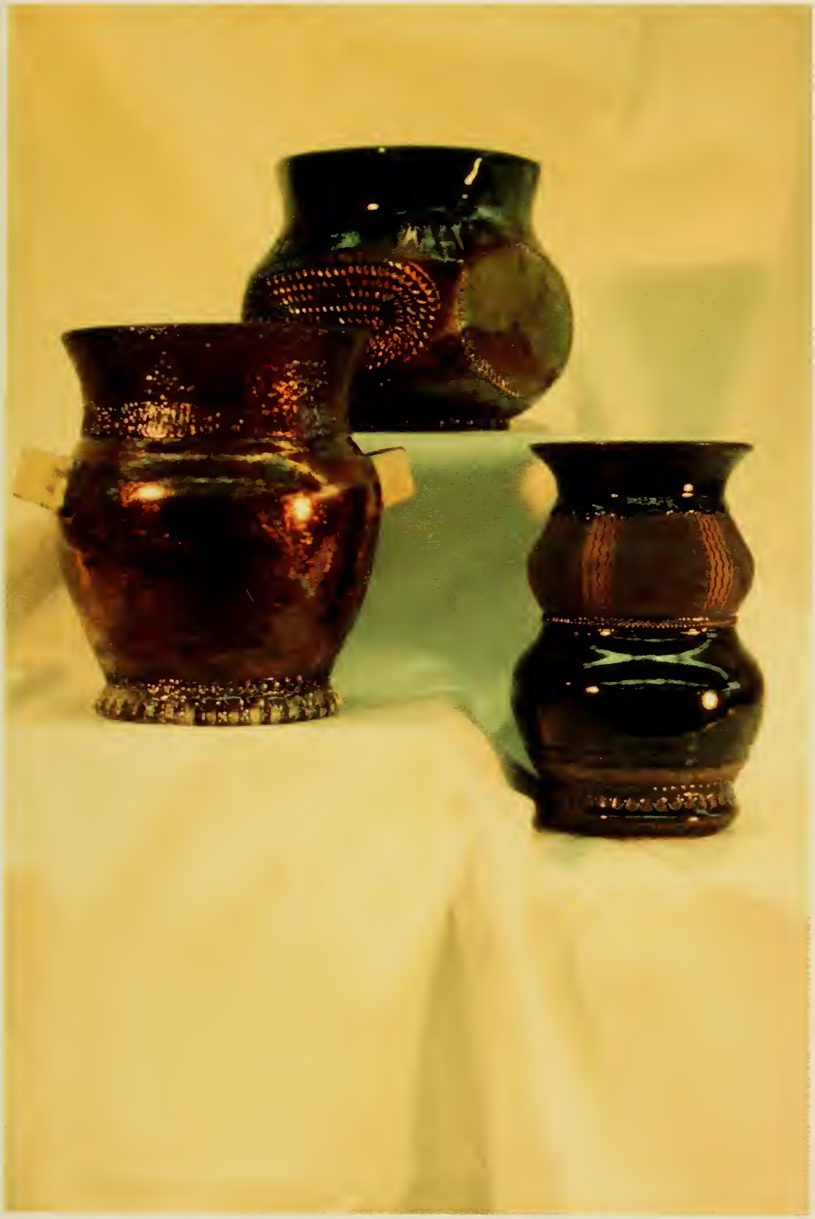
There to greet me was Dr. Wingfield in his wheelchair. The stacks of newspapers were gone, as was all the dirt and dust, and the cats. I smelled vegetable soup cooking in the kitchen and heard the radio going. The radio announcer was advertising some kind of hair straightener. All the lights were on. I shook his hand, entered, and took a seat.

Dr. Wingfield opened the box, removed the new glasses, and put them on. As he returned the temporary glasses to me he said, “I am indeed grateful to you, doctor. The colors are all so vivid and I can read everything. I think that I can even see that dislocated cataract as it floats around back there like a big gray balloon."

A moment later his voice broke. "Emily is still not well, of course, but we may soon start going back to church again."

And there was Emily. She took no notice of us. She was standing in the bedroom with her back to us, and she never left her place. Her head was tilted to one side, and her right hand rested on her hip. She stared into an open coat closet, as if trying to find something which had been lost.

On the way home I drove a little slower. That night I went upstairs and shaved off the silly mustache.



Variations on Raku and Stoneware
Phil Kandel

i piccioni
Jennifer Cohen

Blue Wicker Basket

At her first weekly bridge game
after a son is born, he
is there, held up to his
mother's ample breast.

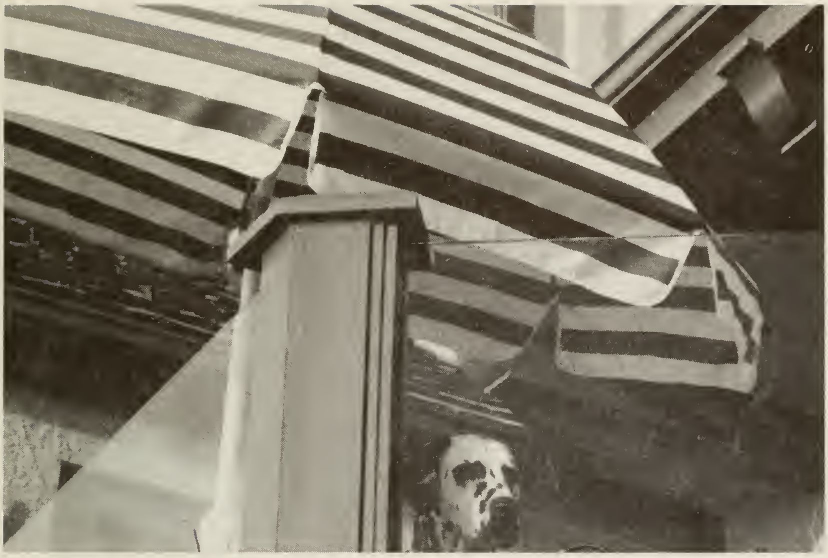
The next week when he is
fussy in wicker
basket beside her,
she unhooks her bra.

Week three he gurgles inside
wicker basket, but soon in tears.
Guest arrives saying, "He's still
hooked up to his supply of milk."

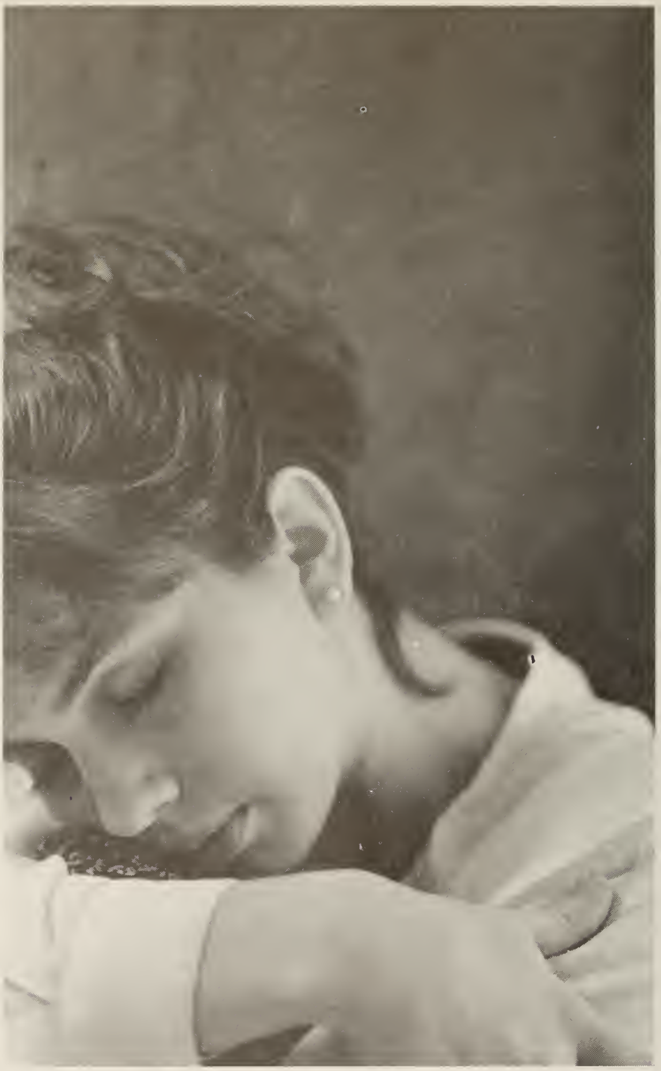
Before the following game,
she gives formula milk
to bridge nursing and
get herself off the hook.

On fifth week, baby has his own
bottle of milk in blue wicker basket,
while mother adjusts glasses
on bridge of nose playing to win.

Rachel McReynolds Brown



Spots and Stripes . . . Forever?
Setona Page



Simplicity
Teresa Larsen

Marilyn

Mary E. O'Sako

Marilyn sat stiffly between her two younger brothers in the backseat of their father's new car. She was glaring out the window, not really seeing the trees that flashed by, waving their autumn leaves like bright flags of caution. She was waiting for Ben, her youngest brother, to venture onto her side of the soft gray seat just one more time so she could jab him a good one. Teach the little snot for taking my window seat, she thought smugly.

Ben leaned over just then, but not into her territory. Not yet. He discovered the shiny new window button and proceeded to press it back and forth, back and forth. The electric whine of the window in its stunted cycle of rise and fall made her shiver.

"Stop it, stupid," she hissed through clenched teeth. Ben stuck out his tongue and went on pressing. Back and forth, back and forth. Finally he managed to lean towards her just a little. It was just enough. Marilyn then shoved her skinny twelve-year-old elbow into his ribs. She pursed her lips in a tiny smile at the squeal he produced. Ben looked at her tearfully, then opened his mouth wide for the howl that Marilyn realized would soon escape. She gave him her fiercest "keep quiet or else" look, just as their father raised his head to peer at them through the haze of his smoke in the rearview mirror.

"What's up?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just Marilyn havin' one of her slobberin' fits, Dad! " crowed Greg, the oldest of the boys. Marilyn turned her head slowly. Up until now she'd thought him asleep beside her, but there he sat in all his tattletale glory. He was covering his mouth with one pudgy hand, while he feigned laughter, and pointed with the other.

"Putty-face." She leaned over and mouthed the words into his face, her eyes narrowed to slits. "Just you wait, I'm really gonna get you, you Daddy's boy!" She kicked his leg for emphasis.

"Ow . . . Dad! "

"Knock it off back there!" their father's voice cut in, "and quit with the windows. I don't want 'em broken before they're paid for!" He exhaled a deep noisy cough along with the last of his tenth cigarette that afternoon. Its smoke curled unimportantly around them, a gauze over the sudden quiet. A manicured hand appeared, its glossy pink tips pressing into the top of the seat in front of them. His girlfriend pulled herself around to face them. She patted her fussy red head and smiled.

"You guys want some ice cream?" Her nasal Cleveland accent was heavy on the cream.

The boys immediately sang out their affirmatives like a bad choir. Marilyn frowned and said nothing.

Too cold for ice cream, dummy, she thought, clicking her tongue as hard as she could. Its sound was lost in her brother's uproar, and unnoticed by her father's girlfriend, who'd returned to the front seat Netherlands. Say no, Dad, say no, say no, Marilyn chanted silently.

"Fine," their father muttered, shaking out another cigarette with his free hand. Fine, thought Marilyn, kicking her foot against the back of the spotless seat. Not only did the little boogers get to go on a trip to IOWA that summer while SHE sat home, they get ice cream and everything else they want, too!

They drove on through the gray October afternoon, their destination sealed. Marilyn shunned everyone, arms and legs folded into herself. She pretended not to hear their ice cream babble as her eyes bored holes into the back of her father's head. She willed him to look into his mirror and see her unhappy reflection. Maybe then he would change his mind. She sighed and rubbed impatiently at a tear that snuck down her cheek when she saw the sign of the ice cream parlor come into view.

Happy's was a small ice cream parlor. It was situated on the outskirts of town and open all year round for convenience. Someone had painted pink and green flowers on its white brick exterior in a less than superb attempt to make it cheerful. Inside, the old walls were painted in pink and white stripes and littered with gaudy posters of ice cream.

After they filed in through the smudged glass doors, Marilyn stalked past the chrome counters that lined one wall, ignoring the frosty aromas that threatened to arouse her appetite. She flopped into one of the cracked red vinyl chairs that crowded the floor, while her brothers rushed the sleepy-eyed young clerk with their orders. She watched her father and his girlfriend standing at the counter with their arms around each other. They were oblivious to her stares. Marilyn could remember when he'd held her mother like that. It seemed like a long time ago to her, before Ben was even born. That was when they'd all lived in the big house over on Johnson Square. Soon after Ben came along he never seemed to be around much. His days at work grew longer, and when he was home there always seemed to be a lot of yelling in the house.

"Thanks, Dad!" Greg and Ben shouted simultaneously, snatching up their ice cream cones and searching noisily for the perfect seat. Marilyn raised her chin firmly; she wouldn't eat a thing from this place. She would wait until she got home. Home. She thought of her mother, who had been starting a batch of cookies when their father had picked them up that afternoon. Standing in their tiny, messy kitchen, she'd yelled out good-bye to them while she mixed the dough furiously, her ample arms jiggling with the effort.

"Cheers," her father said suddenly. He placed a cup of vanilla ice cream before her, a glob of thick black chocolate congealing on its crown. She could hear her brothers giggling close by as her father and his girlfriend sat down across from her. He fished a fresh cigarette from his pocket and lit it, squinting at her through the fresh smoke.

"Everything okay at home?" he asked, shaking out the match with one hand. Its sharp sulfur smell spread out instantly.

"Of course," Marilyn answered, rolling her eyes as she spoke. She could feel them watching her. Squirming in her seat, she searched the walls until she located a clock. It was after 4:00 p.m.

"Mom wanted us home by 5:00."

Her father nodded his answer nonchalantly, smoking quietly while his girlfriend picked daintily at her yogurt and smiled her best cheerleader smile.

"Your brothers and I had a long talk in Iowa. They mentioned that things are kinda rough at home," he said, exhaling an endless stream of smoke through his nostrils. "What do you say, Marilyn, are things okay with your mother and all?" He fumbled with his cigarette case.

"I said of course," Marilyn answered quickly. She scowled and churned at her ice cream, turning it into a gooey mess. A chair crashed to the floor from somewhere in her brothers' vicinity. Its echo was stark against the nearly empty room.

"All right, all right, time to go!" their father declared with a shrug. He ground his cigarette into a tin ashtray while his girlfriend reapplied her lipstick carefully. Marilyn made a hasty dash for the door.

All claims to her window seat were lost again, despite the fact that she'd beaten everyone to it. She'd even pushed Greg and Ben aside in the process, knocking Ben to the ground and diving headfirst into the backseat where she locked the door to secure her prize. When her father heard Ben's cries of defeat, he insisted that Marilyn relinquish "right now or else," forcing Marilyn to sit between her two brothers once more. She sat smoldering in silence under this yoke of "being the oldest" and "knowing better." She remained silent until the car cruised into the driveway of the faded green townhouse she and her brothers shared with their mother. She leapt for the door before the car bounced to a full stop on the potholed pavement. Her brothers leaned back in their seats and clamored to stay.

Their father reached out and touched her arm for the first time that day, for the first time in awhile.

"Marilyn," he began solemnly, clearing his throat, "try to be a little nicer to your little brothers . . . "

"I am always nice!"

"You know what I mean!"

Marilyn pulled her arm away and pushed at the door, ignoring Ben's indignant squeak as she leaned heavily over him.

"Marilyn, did you hear me?" her father asked firmly. "Don't go mentioning our talk to your mother; she wouldn't like it . . . Marilyn?"

"Okay, okay." Marilyn gave him a tight-lipped grin and pretended not to hear his girlfriend's "Bye-bye, sweetie." She climbed out into the waning afternoon. Her back to the purring car, she marched straight for the back door, kicking at the harmless brown leaves, plowing ruthlessly — Hurricane Marilyn.

Inside, she slammed the scuffed kitchen door behind her.

"Mom! Have I got a lot to tell you!" shouted Marilyn.

Lingering odors of meals past mixed uncomfortably with the newer more pungent smell of burnt cookie dough in the stuffy air of the kitchen. Her nostrils began to quiver as she made her way through the darkened room, picking a trail through the shards of broken cookies strewn about the worn yellow linoleum. She tried to swallow and force back the tiny dry lump growing in her throat.

"Mom?" she whispered, stopping at the threshold of the darker living room.

"Well?" Her mother's voice pierced the gloom nearby. Marilyn's eyes adjusted quickly to the outline of her mother's bulk. She sat on the sofa just inside the doorway, beside the spot where Marilyn stood. Marilyn could make out the soiled dishes at her mother's feet, the open beer in her hand. Her head was tilted forward and she leered at Marilyn through half-lidded eyes. Marilyn's throat tightened even further. She recognized those eyes immediately. They were the eyes of the monster who only came out during the "ugly times," and the only light that burned in them was one of contempt for the world.

"What . . . well, WHAT!" Her mother's voice escalated as if it would erupt.

Marilyn's heart skipped. She immediately recited a full account of their afternoon, their drive, their talk. Her voice trembled conspicuously in the waiting stillness. Squeezing her hands tightly, she shut her father's parting words of warning from her mind. She thought instead of his girlfriend's grinning face as she was forced to forfeit her seat, in fact her whole summer, to her brothers.

As she finished, she waited painfully, frozen in front of her mother like a young animal paralyzed by the headlights of an oncoming car.

"What else did he say?" her mother snarled, the sour smell of beer rising strong and hard between them.

"That's all, Mom . . . ," Marilyn stammered. The lump was back, and it was growing and squeezing even harder at her throat. She tried swallowing again, but found she was too weak to dislodge it. It had grown too large for her to handle. Her mother shifted her weight forward to the edge of the groaning sofa. Viciously she kicked the plate across the bare wooden floor, never taking her eyes from Marilyn's face.

The back door slammed again, issuing forth a stream of colder air through the apartment. Riding on its current came the unsuspecting chatter of the boys who'd crashed merrily into the dark kitchen. Their flick of the light switch revealed a hint of their peril. They grew quieter, whispering over the small crunching sounds their feet made on the baked remnants that carpeted the floor. A streak of light illuminated their mother's face, now focused mercilessly on the boys. They stopped in their tracks.

"C'mere," she growled.

The boys inched forward, clinging fast to each other, their faces white.

"What, Mommy?"

Marilyn backed slowly into the dark corner behind her, away from their whimpering forms as they neared the sofa.

"C'mon you little traitors, bastards all of ya . . . BASTARDS!!" their mother screamed. Marilyn squatted down. She thought she could smell her brothers' fear; it was as thick as her own, as thick as the outside air that still clung like fallen leaves to their clothing. Ben buckled against Greg, a dark stain appearing, then growing down the length of his trousers, forming a tiny pool around his foot. Their mother rose unevenly to her feet, pulling the length of black electric cord from beneath her flattened cushion. Her beer can clattered to the floor, its foamy contents spreading, then mixing with the growing puddle beneath the boys.

Greg and Ben fell back, pleading frantically. "Please, Mom . . . don't, PLEASE!" Their cries rose to shrieks as the cord began to fall. Marilyn covered her ears. Please, stop, stop, stop, stop . . . her mind raced along with her heart while their mother swung relentlessly at the upraised arms and legs of the boys. Every stinging connection of wire and tender flesh turned her brothers' screams into something animal-like in their agony. They seemed only to lend fuel to their mother's rage. Her arm swung higher and faster, higher and faster. Endlessly. Marilyn bit into her hand and thought of their father. Was he still outside? I could run for the door . . . then what? She closed her eyes.

Finally, their mother swung so wide that she lost her balance, her feet sliding over the slick mess on the floor. She fell back into the sofa. She fell hard, shaking the room, a sharp snap sounding from deep inside the frame of the sofa, or somewhere. The sound of something that is really and finally — broken. Her brothers' fearful sobs mingled with Marilyn's silent ones.

Marilyn opened her eyes slowly. She could see Ben and Greg curled up against each other, like puppies trying to keep warm. Their mother sat up again suddenly and gathered the cord for a final swing. Grunting, she flung it across the room, where it fell, now harmless, behind a chair.

"Get to bed," she said breathlessly. The fight was gone from her voice, the menace from her eyes. Ben and Greg scurried for the stairs. Marilyn could hear them scuffle softly about overhead. She rose to her feet as her mother shifted again, then waited. She could hear her mother's ragged weeping and noticed for the first time the scent of her cologne, Lily of the Valley. Had it been there the whole time? Its scent grew and overpowered that of the beer, the urine, the fear. Marilyn stepped cautiously from her corner and into the light. The monster was gone, there would be no more beatings this night.

Marilyn slipped into the kitchen and retrieved another can of beer, which she presented soberly to her mother, who accepted it automatically, almost humbly, her reddened eyes vacant. She was retreating into her "other place," leaving Marilyn and the boys alone at the scene of destruction.

Marilyn returned to the kitchen, sweeping a quiet path through the litter. She assembled a tray for the boys. Sandwiches, some chocolate kisses, and the last apple in the house, peeled and cut carefully into equal halves. Two cups of milk and she was on her way. She carried this up to their room, knocking before she entered. They rustled under their covers as she entered, hiding their small pale faces from her. She set the tray gingerly before them.

"It's okay now, she's asleep," Marilyn offered gently. Ben hiccuped, fresh tears welling up.

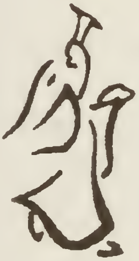
"It's gonna be all right Bennie, shhhh . . .," Greg whispered. He put his hand awkwardly on Ben's shoulder. Marilyn winced at the sight of the long, bloody welt across his knuckles.

"Let me see, Greg?" She held out her hand anxiously.

"No! Just leave us alone." Greg pulled the blanket closer, more protectively as Ben's sobs rose accusingly around her. He sat and watched warily until she left.

Closing their door, she retreated to her room. Her room. All pink and neat. “The cleanest room in the house,” their mother used to brag. She thought of the small room her brothers shared. Their clothing and toys were always stuffed and scattered about. Even when they had tried to straighten it out, their mother often screamed at them about it. Marilyn would only snicker at their pleas for help.

Sighing deeply, she gazed out the window where she could see the trees waving their leaves sadly in the night. A familiar form tugged at the edge of her vision. Charlie Bear sat on her pillow, grinning proudly, his creamy white belly puffed out. It had been the last present her father had given her before he’d left them. She had yelled at Bennie so many times for sneaking in here and playing with him. Marilyn stared thoughtfully for a few moments before she finally gathered him into her arms and left the room, closing the door behind her.



Birds of the Weather

I am one of four and we are all alike;
Our pewter bodies of one mold
Shine as silver carvings in the light.
My life hangs by a thread, suspended with the rest,
All tied up in knots we cannot see
To a common circle overhead—
A merry-not-go-round.

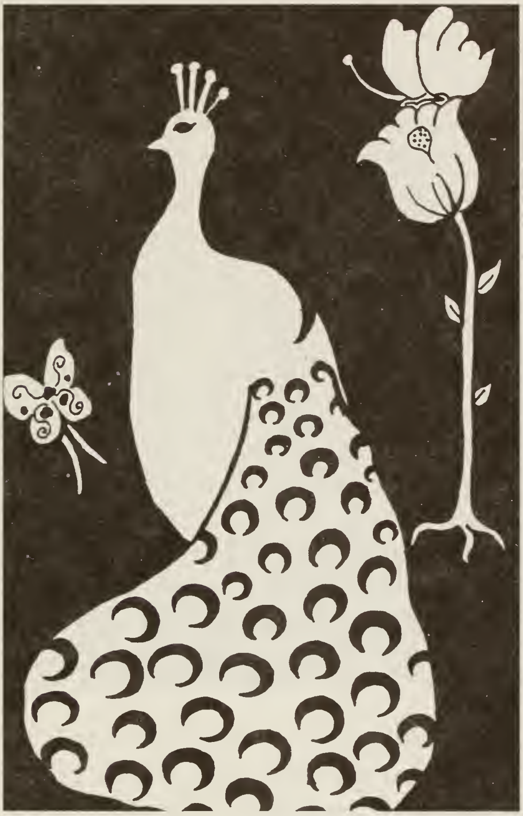
We only move as metal marionettes,
Mastered not by hands but by the wind.
When it is still, we float in file and keep a perfect rank;
Contact only comes when we are swept
To collisions, hard or soft, but painless,
Of beaks and backs and wings all aimless.
We cannot fly but only swing to meet.

I often have a song but cannot call to give
Voice to the air or noise to the wind.
I can dance an airy step, swaying side to side
But cannot do a twirl or doe-se-doe.

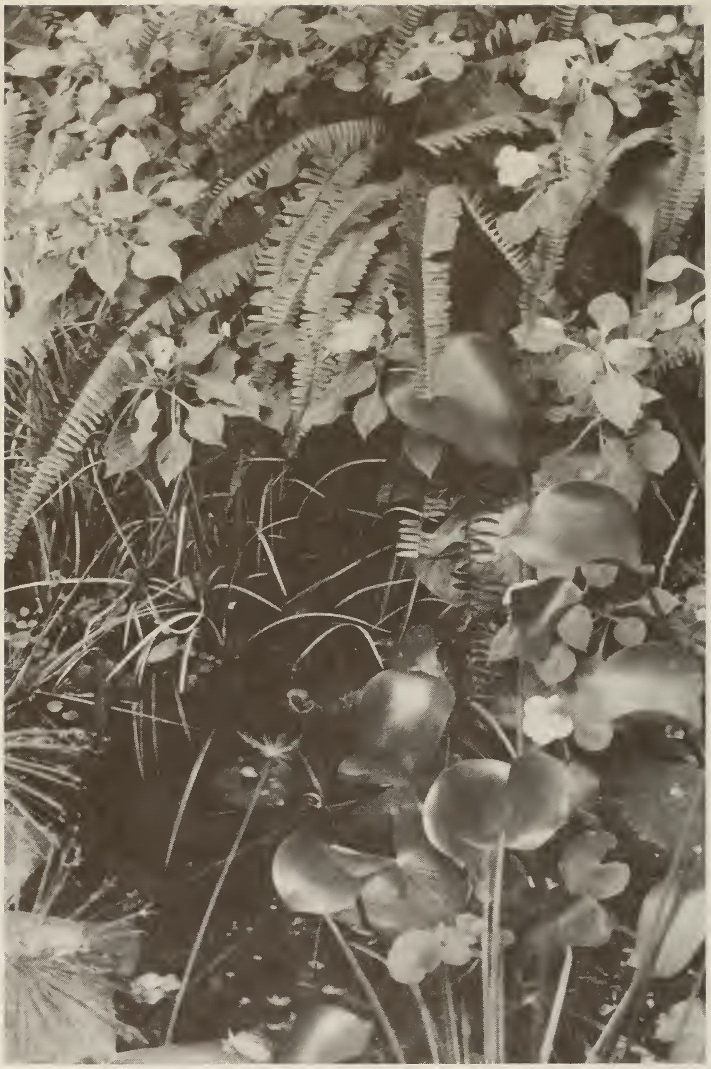
I am not chilled by rain or cold;
I'm never ill or old.
I have no plans but play in peace with all.
I cannot leave the seasons so the seasons come to me;
I stay north for winter and I summer in the south.

My companions view the yard and woods beyond
    But I the kitchen window and the porch.
With stirring air we play the gentle jingle of triangles;
In high, rough winds we chatter harsh staccato.
In a steady breeze I reach my prime,
    My graceful time, our purest rhyme,
For then we chime -- as bells, together --
    Not to tell the hour but the weather.

Jean O. Hattle



Moonlight Series No.1
Teresa Anderson



Free to Be
Ellen Loe Frazier

Contributors

Theresa Anderson is a junior studying art who wants to pursue a career in commercial art.

Rachel McReynolds Brown is a practicing artist and teacher who likes to design concrete images with paint and words.

Jamie Burchett is a senior working on a degree in English. She would like to teach at the high school level.

Leigh Calhoun is a senior working on a degree in English communications. She currently has plans to become a journalist. “But,” she says, “who knows?”

Jennifer Cohen is a senior working toward a dual degree in art and criminal justice.

William Deaver is a Spanish instructor at Armstrong. He majored in English as an undergraduate and says that he would like to reach the point where others study his poetry.

Ellen Loe Frazier is a senior in the art department who is looking forward to graduate school to further her studies in photography. She would like to teach at the college level while continuing to paint and publish fine art photos.

Jean O. Hattle is a wife, mother, grandmother, a Latin teacher who attended Armstrong for re-certification. "I write everyday," she says. "If I don't, it's like something's missing."

Gabriele Hauck arrived here from Germany in 1992. Now in her senior year, she is a general studies major with a minor in economics. She is the 1995 winner of the President's Cup Award.

Cindy Intorre is a junior in the art department. She is aiming towards a doctoral degree and would like to become a successful freelance artist and photographer.

Forrest Jackson is a junior majoring in English. His ultimate goal is to live on a sailboat and be a writer.

Phil Kandel is a sophomore in the art education program. He wants to earn an MFA and teach at the college level.

Shawn Kelshaw is a junior and an art illustration major.

Keith Langston is in his sophomore year and intends to pursue a career in art.

Teresa Larsen is a middle grade education major (concentration in science and history) in her senior year. She wants to become fluent in Spanish in order to teach ESL students.

Tom Manchester practiced ophthalmology for thirty-five years, first at Johns Hopkins, then at Emory University . He attended Armstrong in order to take a fiction writing course.

Stacy McClain (No information available)

Les Mosley is a sophomore considering a degree in English communications. He plans to manifest himself in the mysteries of life.

Bobby Myers is a junior working on a degree in psychology with a minor in criminal justice. He is considering a career in forensic psychology.

Mary O'Sako is a junior in the biology department. Her goal is to teach at the college level and to write.

Setona Page is a senior majoring in art. She looks forward to furthering her education in graduate school and she wants to teach.

Susan Parker graduated from Armstrong in 1994 with a degree in English. Once in graduate school, she will concentrate on either Early American or Victorian Literature. "Show," she advises, "don't tell."

Sherri Ralph is in her junior year as an art education major, and plans to teach.

Patricia Saunders, a sophomore, has a double major, in biology and pre-med. "When I grow up," she says, "I hope I don't lose my imagination."

Shawna Silverman, a sophmore in the history department, has as one of her future goals the Herculean task of "raising sarcasm to a fine art form."

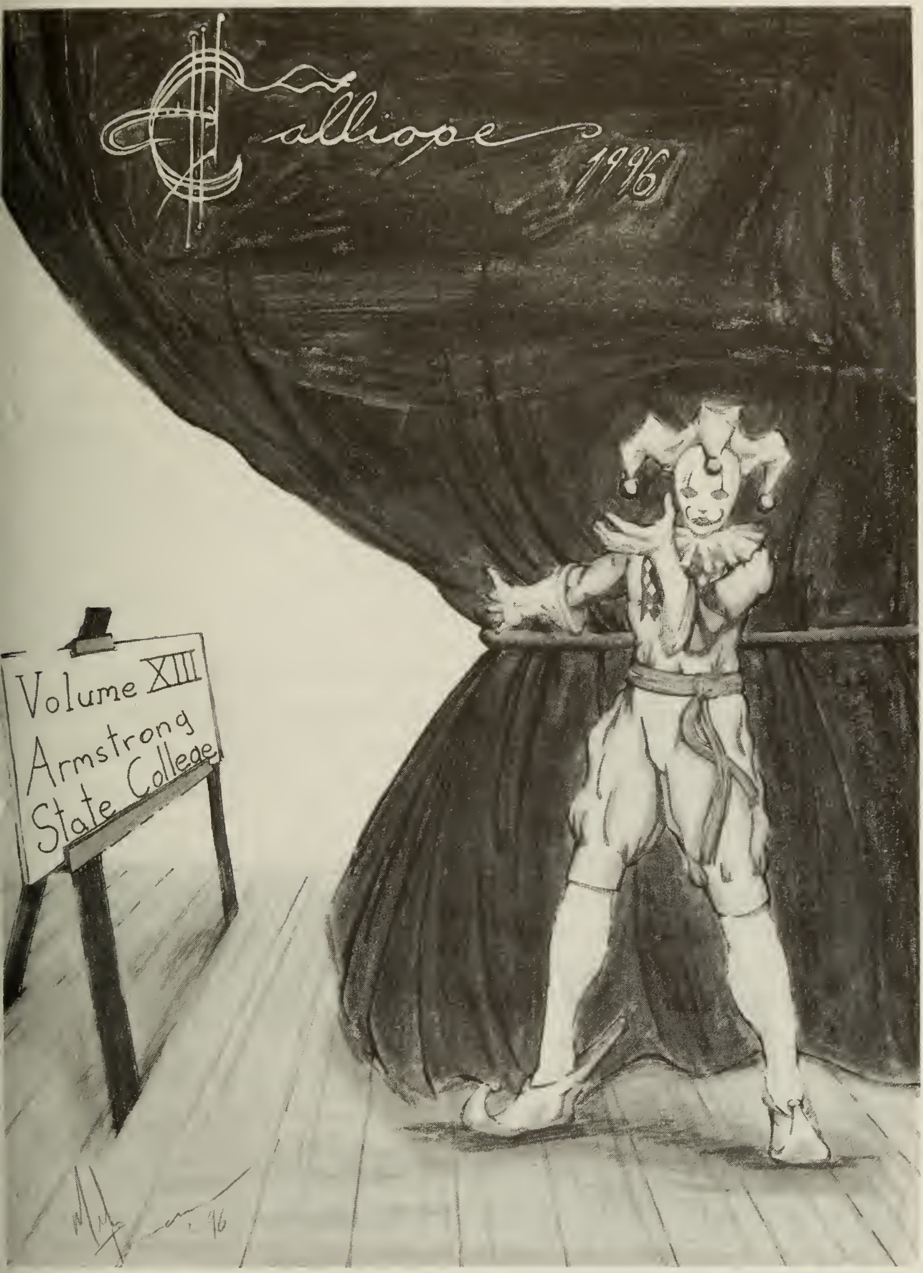
Ramona Michelle Singleton is a senior working on a degree in art education.

Doug Spinks is a senior working on a degree in psychology, and plans to enter Georgia Southern University in the fall of 1995.

Robert Trimm, a senior, is a photography major. He plans to pursue graduate studies at Savannah College of Art and Design. He likes "to take ordinary scenes and make them speak."

Michael Walker is a senior working on a degree in history. He plans to go on to law school.

Calliope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The faculty advisor selects the *Lillian Spencer Award* for best poem and best prose piece.

Mr. Tom Cato, of the Fine Arts Department, chose the *Lillian Spencer Award* for best artwork.

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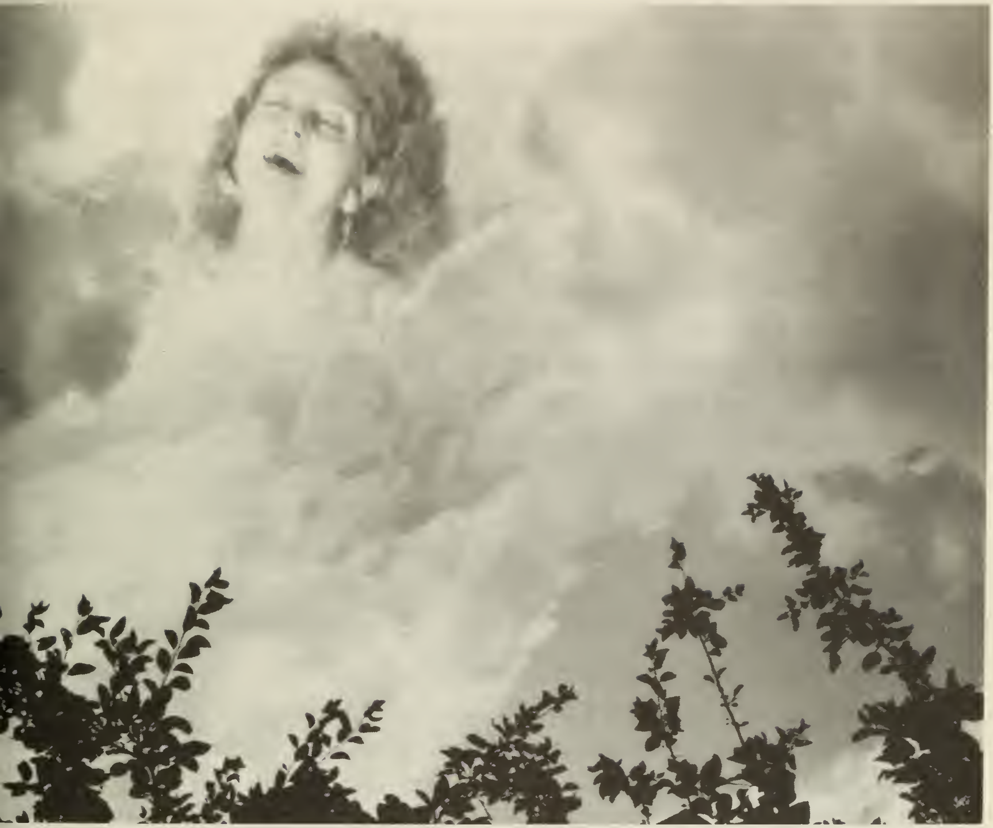
* Indicates *Lillian Spencer Award*



The Ultimate Ecstasy

Setona Page

Jumping

Daphne Bazemore

It had stood for years unnumbered, vast and alone, to span the broad river. Though made of gray concrete, it had always been known as Steel Bridge. Surrounded by thick, obscenely green bushes, the bridge was the jumping-off point for adulthood. Every summer since its creation, the graduating teenagers from the local high school would gather to swim and sun and fish. And jump.

Lloyd stood bouncing lightly on his toes, waiting his turn. Heady from the reflection of the sun off the muddy brown water, he looked down toward the south end of the bridge, the place where the cops would first appear when they discovered that today was the day for jumping. Roger Waters caught him looking and smiled nastily. “Scared, Benton?” he sneered.

“Bite me, Waters. I’m just looking at the sky.”

“Yeah? I bet you wish the cops would come so you wouldn’t have to jump. You gonna pee your drawers when you hit the water, Benton?”

“Get lost, Roger. I don’t need you to make sure I don’t chicken out. I’m gonna jump, same as everyone else.”

“Sure thing. Just remember I’ll be happy to give you that little extra push if you need it.” With that Roger walked farther down the line to hassle someone else. Lloyd released the breath he’d pent up in his mouth and slowly exhaled.

He looked up at the perfect blue sky and wondered why it wouldn’t start raining. Hard. He thought about what it would be like, jumping out into nothing, praying he wouldn’t hit the bottom and get stuck and drown. Praying that his shorts wouldn’t fly off when he hit the water. Praying he didn’t scream too much like a girl. Just praying that he wouldn’t do anything to embarrass himself.

The whole class knew he was afraid of heights. He’d proved that conclusively on the physics trip when he’d passed out on the roller coaster. Lydia Rollins, his lab and ride partner, had slapped him frantically, screaming for them to stop the frigging ride 'cause he was gonna fall out or something. He'd come to just as the ride started down and had promptly puked into Lydia's blouse. At the end of the ride he had been rewarded for his outstanding performance with a handful of wet napkins and a new lab partner.

Now they expected him to jump off a bridge. Fat chance. He'd probably puke on the way down and fall right into his own vomit. He was suddenly doubly glad he'd skipped breakfast.

Looking at the line, he realized that many of the students who had formerly been in front of him had somehow moved behind him while he was daydreaming. It was to be a crucifixion then. He was to be their entertainment.

For a brief moment he considered walking away, citing appendicitis. But he knew instantly from their hungry faces that they would never allow it. One way or another, he was going off that bridge. It struck him suddenly that this same thing probably happened every year. Some poor, sad sack, the class punching bag, would be bullied off the bridge, much to the delight of his fellow students. He wondered if his father had gone willingly, bravely. He decided his father had probably been the first one to jump, doing three back flips on his way down, his lawnmower-grill grin never wavering.

There wasn't too much talking as Lloyd Benton stepped up onto the concrete railing. Mostly everyone just watched, their eyes wide, their mouths half-smiling, ready to roar if he should wet his pants or, God forbid, shit them. Ready with the catcalls, if he should step down. Lloyd knew it. From the moment his feet left the concrete, he would never be able to say, "Sorry, guys, I just can't do it. You see, my father, that paragon of virtue, used to take me with him on roofing jobs when I was a kid. One day I fell off and he never bothered to come see if I was okay. He just hollered for me to get my clumsy ass back up there and bring him a beer while I was at it. And so, no. I'm very sorry to spoil your fun, but no, I just can't do it. I'm afraid that if I do, this time there won't be any getting back up there because I'll be dead. Of fright."

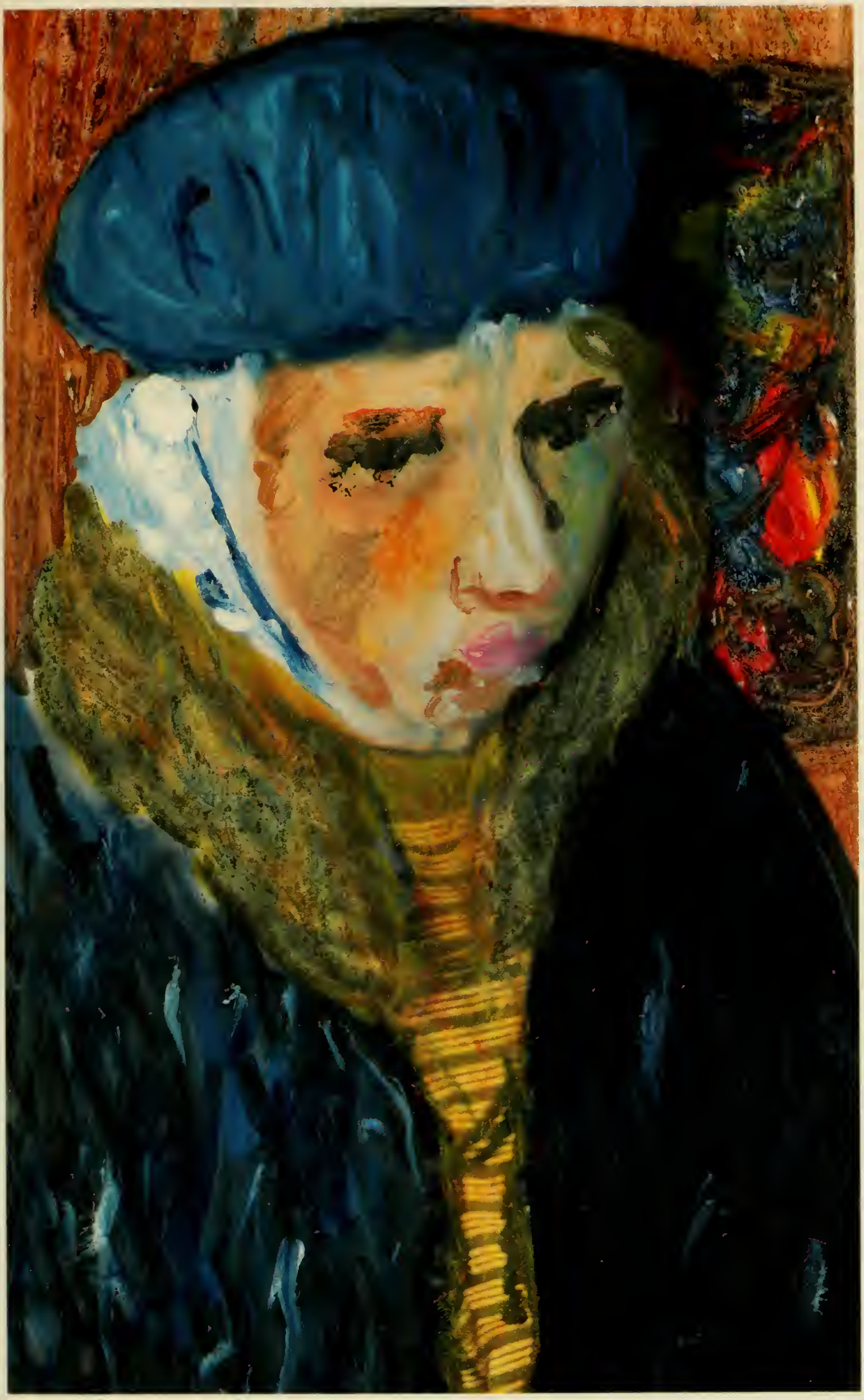
Lloyd clenched his fists and looked back at them, at their hungry faces, their eager eyes. He thought of his father. He realized that if his father were here now he would be part of that crowd, ready to push him if it was necessary. His father would have had no mercy. And neither would his classmates.

He suddenly thought about the bushes under the bridge, how they had become a make-out spot for teenagers over the years. He wondered how many children had been conceived there, if he had been. He decided that it was a large probability and that it explained a lot about his father.

His father hated him because he felt that Lloyd had stolen his life.

Lloyd looked up at the sky again marveling at its blue perfection.

On the way down he told his father that he had never loved him anyway.

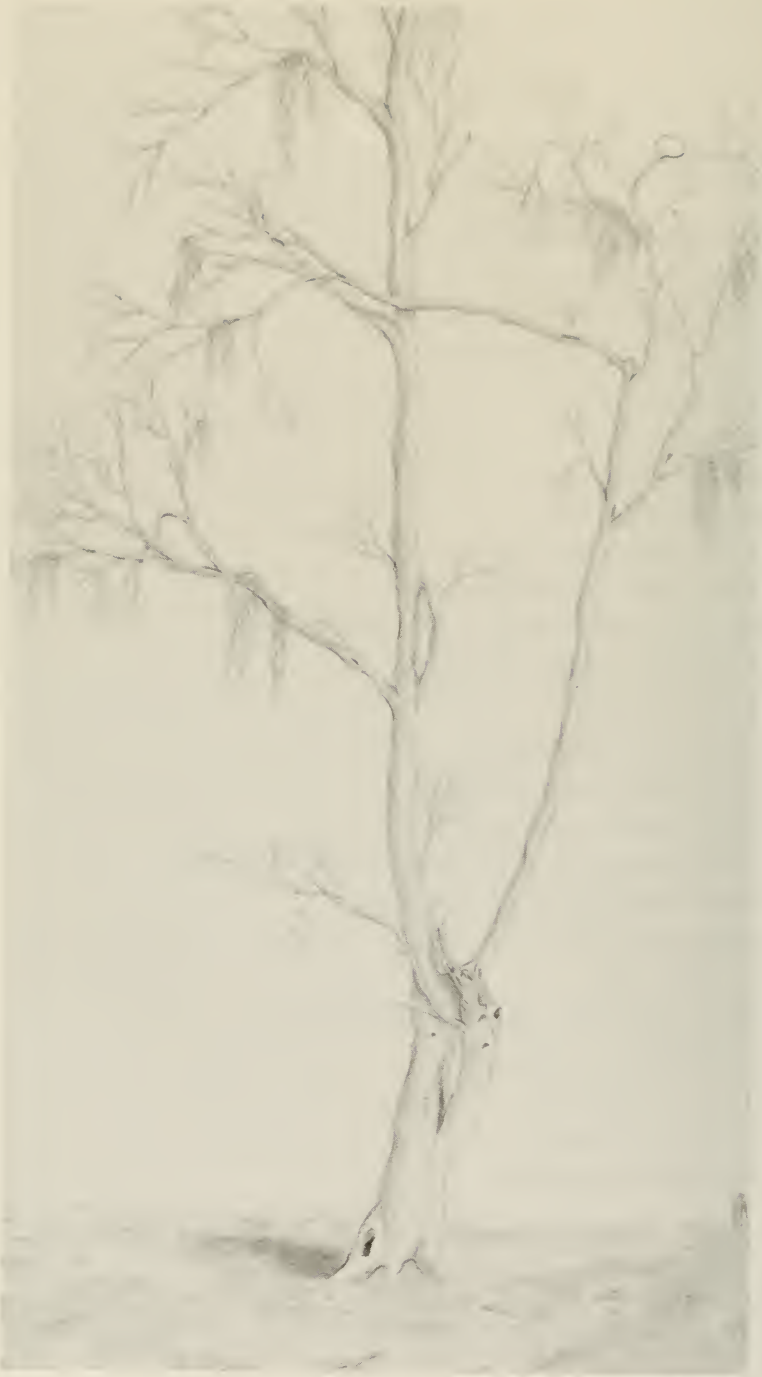


Self Portrait as Van Gogh
Renee Hill

Black Roses

Open windows let in no air
or light, the sun has died.
Instead I shall light candles,
placing them upon the table
amidst empty plates
amidst silverware
amidst the dust.
Settings for a feast
to which only I arrived.
Is it too early to pour the wine?
What goes with nothing, white or red?
The stillness begins to unnerve
as it always has;
it has always been here.
I shall finally break the silence
Playing music in the ballroom
An old phonograph scratching out old melodies
Echoing throughout the chambers,
Haunting this place.
I can still waltz.
Swirling around bouquets of black roses
in the waning candlelight
taking into my arms
spirits of the memories
of what never occurred.

Eric Filmer



Solitude

Stefano Magliulo

Tough Guy

David Starnes

Before he lost his legs, Jonas Lawrence was a regular at the snooker table in the back room of Cleo's place. He never looked up from a game, never regarded me at any neighboring pool tables, never responded to my habit of sinking the cue ball, missing the eight ball, or losing most of the time. I was just another college student. I never understood the physics of snooker, the kiss of red against red, but I liked the way he glided around the table as if he were on wheels. He moved with grace and deliberation and leaned into a shot as if he were aiming a rifle. One eye was almost sealed shut into a permanent wink, and the good one matched the blue of the chalk. Between turns he drew from a pack of Camels. He rarely spoke, except to comment on his opponent's shot, and even then it was a growl of neither praise nor sympathy, but like the tentative bark a dog might make at some sudden motion. Sometimes his rasp resembled a laugh, and a dozen crooked teeth surrendered to the occasion. But otherwise his mouth seemed to have arrived at a bad taste and settled there. When he wasn't wielding a pool stick, he sat near the card table, not playing, but watching as he smoked, or smoking as he read from a shelf of paperbacks, or reading with a cup of black coffee in his hand. The books he held were usually westerns by Max Brand or Luke Short, but once I saw him with a dog-eared Pocket Book of Verse. Mr. Lawrence wore dark shirts with snaps instead of buttons, dark slacks, and beat-up moccasins over dark socks. He combed his white hair straight back. He looked like an older, more brawny version of Hopalong Cassidy.

It was my first year of college in the mill town of Port Angeles and my second attempt at student life in general. I had tried the university right out of high school in Seattle, but dropped out after a semester, not prepared for the tallness of the world. I remained at home, helping out at my father's lumber business.

My father had been in the navy. We had moved around a lot when I was growing up, coming and going in the middle of a school year, breaking up the leisure of a summer, adding an extra chill to a winter. At each school I would arrive either far ahead or far behind in my lessons. I was either catching up to the kids around me or getting bored as they caught up to me. By the time I graduated from Roosevelt High, I was intimidated by everything that breathed, by everyone who addressed me—from the mailman to the girl across the street, from my teacher to my own father. My social skills were like those of most people my age, I suppose, only worse. Yet, I wasn't interested in people my own age. I preferred the company of children or those much older. I thought there was more to learn from the extremes.

After a year of working for my father I moved to Port Angeles and enrolled in Peninsula, a small school in the hills above the town. The first year there I had roomed with three other boys, but I had grown weary of lights burning at all hours, of bathroom humor and humorless bathrooms, of stale beer, dead socks and underwear, and most wearisome of all, the pervasive topic of sex. Although I was older than the others, I had not yet experienced the act itself beyond a surplus of kisses. That summer I had stroked a single breast, one night in a lifeguard's chair at Alki Point. I had scaled a hill, while all about me the talk was of mountains--the air was thin with visions of Himalayan ecstasy.

A few days before fall classes began, I drove up from Seattle to find a new place to live. I had heard about a cheap rooming house that rented to students, as well as truckers, laborers and salesmen. It was an old two story house on the bluff overlooking the Straight of Juan de Fuca, and at night Vancouver Island displayed a bracelet of lights. The house was the faded red of a retired barn, and a patch of cornstalks took up half the back yard. I was drawn to its age, its humble construction.

When Jonas Lawrence answered my knock he filled the front door with the same imposing stance I had seen at Cleo's.

I expected him to be armed with a cue stick, but his hand gripped a paperback and obscured its cover, except for the head of a wild-eyed horse.

"Yeah," he rasped, not as a question, but as if in reply. The clear blue eye inspected me while the other seemed to resist looking at me. I addressed a scar that splintered a corner of his upper lip. I asked about a room and he led me through a parlor to the door of one that contained nothing more, nor could it have allowed more, than a bed, a chest of drawers, and a wardrobe closet.

"Fifty dollars a week," said Mr. Lawrence. "Share the kitchen. Bath down the hall."

"If it's no trouble," I began, standing before the tall world.

"No trouble," he said, raising a hand between us before he walked away. "Move in today."

I immediately settled into the worn and outworn quality of Mr. Lawrence's rooms. I warmed to the yellowed shades, the dust upon the drapes, the cabbage roses on the ancient wallpaper. And I warmed to my host and landlord. He was around seventy and as set in his ways as the linoleum path between our rooms and the hallway. I had been intimidated by his bulk and his direct one-eyed gaze, and yet I relinquished that intimidation once I absorbed the sounds and smells of his presence. I felt at home among the worn and outworn.

I still clung to the artifacts of my childhood—a baseball glove, picture books, a Lone Ranger lunch box—things I'd outgrown or played out. They were outdated but remained in the present. But I was taken by older things as well, the things beyond my birth: old clothes, old books, old records, old cars. I loved to prowl among thrift shops and second hand stores, responding to age and my ageless tastes. I wore clothes from another era, shirts and jackets that a man three times my age might have in his closet.

Mr. Lawrence mostly left me alone. We might not encounter each other for days at a time, as I left early for classes and he remained in bed, or one of us turned in before the other returned home. Sometimes we sat down to a meal together, and one night a week we shared his whiskey.

I'd had a few beers before, and there had been alcohol in my family's house, but neither of my parents made much of a dent in any one bottle. The liquor usually surfaced at Thanksgiving, and gradually returned to a closet or cupboard with the last of the Christmas decorations. But Mr. Lawrence introduced me to it straight; Old Crow poured modestly into a glass until it diminished my own sense of modesty, and I voiced the opinions of a man of the world, without an original thought behind them. I soon discovered that not only was my landlord practically sightless in one eye, but nearly deaf in one ear. He sat drinking in profile at the kitchen table, with his weak eye and ear turned towards me. Occasionally he cupped a hand over the ear, straining to catch my low inflections. It would have been more agreeable to have switched places with him at the table, but it never seemed to have occurred to him. Besides the oilcloth was more faded at his chair. His arm had rested there a long time.

Mr. Lawrence had been in the merchant marines, had worked as a stevedore, a rodeo rider, an umpire in the minor leagues, and for the railroad. He was twice married and twice divorced and had lived in his red house for twenty-five years. After each splash of whiskey in our glasses he replaced the cap on the bottle, and after several splashes, his stories detoured into other stories. By then he ignored my empty glass and drank from the bottle, only to lower it again with an afterthought. The bottle approached his mouth a few more times in anticipation of the big sip. Then came his perpetual look of surprise when his mouth met the cap. But by that moment my chin was approaching my chest and I was off to bed, finding my way by a kind of braille consisting of wallpaper, plaster, and lamp shades.

On other nights I was awakened by the gruff exchanges between Mr. Lawrence and one of the roomers down the hall. Once he and a salesman I had never seen look sober tried to recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter," and Mr. Lawrence kept repeating, “The time has come to speak of many things.” Or the evening he and a meeker presence argued over who was older, and Mr. Lawrence claimed to be one hundred. I fell back asleep believing him.

The fall term passed by as quietly as the leaves of the sycamores and elms. I took a course in world literature, a speech class, and French. The theater department was doing Look Homeward, Angel, which was set in the early part of this century. There was a joke around campus that I had loaned out my wardrobe for the play.

In the thin air of November, when the leaves were at their most red and yellow, and the light of day was religiously serene, I fell in love with Leah Haven. She was in my speech class, where she had turned my head with her blushing diffidence and willful defiance; she giggled and she held her chin high. She had grown up fifteen miles away in Sequim. She was a violinist in the local orchestra and was majoring in German. She had dreams of continental breakfasts, first class railway compartments, and studying under some palsied baton in Vienna. She was sparrow-like with big feet. I called her Minnie Mouse. She called me Charlie Chaplin, because I went by Charles and she thought I walked like the tramp. By Halloween our kisses had all but welded our mouths together, and by the first frost we were ready for more. I lied and said that I had, too, at seventeen. “We were such babes,” she said, her face half in mourning. Leah roomed with two other girls in the lower level of the home of the philosophy professor, Dr. Werner, and his wife. Our moments there alone were rare, and to spend the night was out of the question.

On a gray and damp Sunday Leah appeared at Mr. Lawrence’s front door. Mr. Lawrence spent most Sundays at Cleo’s, and I was glad to have the place to myself. Leah wore the trench coat I’d found in a thrift shop but was too small for me. She looked like a child pretending to be a spy.

“I had to get out of there. A bunch of guys came over and I couldn’t hear myself think. I hope you don’t mind me coming here. I would have called but—”

"No. That's fine. I'm glad. Sit. Please." I was nervous as a horse. It was the first time in my life that a girl had called on me. I pulled Mr. Lawrence's chair from the table. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be nice. Yes, I would. Thank you."

Mr. Lawrence kept a kettle warm on the stove. I made a small pot and placed it on the table to steep. She warmed her hands on the pot as if it were a lamp. She eyed the kitchen, the parlor, the cracked linoleum, the loose wallpaper, the sunken sofa.

"So this is where you live," she said. "You like old things, don't you? Like the coat you gave me. And your old Charlie Chaplin pants. I figured you'd live in a place like this. I think it's nice."

"Well, it's pretty old, all right."

"So where's your old friend? Mister — I can't remember his name."

"Lawrence. He's probably down at Cleo's."

"Cleo's? That old tavern on Front Street?"

I poured each of us a cup of weak Earl Grey. "Well, it's a pool hall as well."

"A pretty old pool hall, if you ask me. Don't tell me you've been there. Well, of course you would have."

"Sure. That's how I met my landlord. Well, not exactly. I used to see him there a lot. I was kind of scared of him."

"Why scared?"

"I don't know. I thought he was some old tough guy, which I guess he is."

"Did you ever talk to him?"

"I was afraid to. But I was wrong. He doesn't bother anybody."

"Can we go there sometime?"

"To Cleo's? Sure. Do you like to shoot pool?"

She giggled, revealing the tip of her tongue and precise little teeth. "Maybe you can teach me."

"Ha. I'm not exactly Paul Newman. In fact, I'm not very good at all."

"Oh really?" She held her cup high in both hands and peered at me through the handle, as if she were taking a picture. "What are you good at?"

Her expression had changed from the girl in speech class and the girl I had kissed until I was ready to crawl into her mouth. It was now the face of a woman I was just meeting. It was still Leah, but Leah with lines and colors I'd missed before. She stepped out of her coat, letting it fall to the chair, no longer a child pretending, now taller and fuller; in a minute she would rise to the ceiling like Alice.

"Where's your room?" she asked with an older voice.

I led her by the hand and closed the door and pulled the shade. The light in the room was the color of sleep. We did the rest in silence.

I don't know what time it was when Mr. Lawrence found us. I'd forgotten his habit of cracking the door to see if I was in, sometimes switching on the overhead light. I'd either pretend to be asleep or that his waking me had not been a bother. But when the room lit up and I had grown a second head, Mr. Lawrence froze, and even his bad eye seemed to register. The room went dark again and the door closed softly behind him.

Leah giggled under the covers, a girl again. "I think I've outstayed my welcome."

"No, don't leave yet." I held on to the newness of her, to the scent of pine and something metallic. "I have to tell you. I —"

"Yes. . ." She stretched the word out, lowering her voice, mocking authority.

"That was the first time for me. I couldn't tell you before."

She was silent but the room was not dark enough for me to miss her eyes when she moved her hand across them. We drifted back to sleep and woke again at dawn. We dressed and eased past Mr. Lawrence's closed door and through the parlor.

Leah's coat had been neatly hung on the back of the kitchen chair I used. We kissed at the front door before she withdrew into a white morning. It had snowed and I thought the whole world was a wedding.

On the day when the world was observing the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Leah telephoned to say she had missed her period. She thought she had been safe with me, and now she was scared. She couldn't see me for awhile; she was going home to her family. The approaching holidays grew louder and more offensive. School was out for three weeks, but I felt no elation, no sense of release. I sought refuge with my own family, wishing to avoid the tall world again, but I returned to Port Angeles right after Christmas. My calls to Sequim had been curtly received by Leah's mother: "I'll give her the message."

Finally I drove to her home. A tree blinked off and on relaying back to itself in the center of a picture window. The front railing was draped with red velvet, and a giant candy cane was attached to the front door.

Leah's face showed no age at all. She greeted me with the same self-assurance, coupled with the same hesitancy I'd witnessed in speech class, when she had addressed thirty skeptical faces on "The Romantic Impulse of Johannes Brahms." Except for my face, which Leah had fixed upon by the end of her talk. But now I wished to discard my face, to shed it; I didn't know what else to do with it.

She thrust her eyes at me, dark and defiant, but I looked away from them. She asked to sit with me in my car. I kept my eyes on the street, where a few boys were testing out new bicycles. She spoke to my profile. I would just as soon she had met with a deaf ear and a closed eye.

"You see, it wasn't you at all, but someone I used to know. He called me the week before. There was no one at home, and it just. . .happened. I'm sorry. I didn't know how to tell you. But Charles. . .Charlie. . .that day, that night with you was so different. Oh, God, I'm ruining this." She started to cry and I let her. "I couldn't talk to you. I was afraid. Like you used to be of Mr. Lawson."

"Lawrence." I turned toward her at last. "You were afraid of me? That's a laugh. I'm no tough guy."

"I know. It's because you're not tough. I couldn't hurt you like I'm hurting you now. You're too good for me."

In the late afternoon of the last day of the year I lay with my face to the wall. Mr. Lawrence knocked and opened the door. He spoke without looking at me, as he would at the table. "We might as well bend a few elbows," he said. "There's nothing else to do around here."

I followed him into the kitchen where he had mixed up some eggnog. He offered me a glass cup and we toasted the new year. We were still toasting an hour later. We had run out of eggnog and had started in on the remaining bourbon. This time we both drank from the bottle.

"I was getting worried about you, Charles. Staying in your room. Staring at the ceiling all day. Not a good habit for a fellow to get into." He showed me his good eye which shone like a jewel. He lit a cigarette and passed the bottle across the table.

"I had a gentleman upstairs one year. Lost his wife. Blew his head off. You should have seen his face when I found him. You could see the disgust that made him put the gun in his mouth. Then the fear when he pulled the trigger. Then the shock when he fell back and saw his brains on the ceiling." He shook his head and reached for the bottle. "Damndest thing I've ever seen."

Out in the night the revelers were starting to broadcast with car horns and a few tentative firecrackers.

Mr. Lawrence held the bottle up to the light. "How do you like that?" he said. "We're all out of whiskey and cigarettes and women. Let's take a hike."

We got our coats. Mr. Lawrence started to turn out the kitchen light but then decided to leave it on. He spoke over his shoulder as we entered the hallway. "Makes it look like we're home when we get back." I closed the front door behind us and we set out for the lights of the liquor store a few blocks away.

Mr. Lawrence was in the air before I had stepped from the curb. The kid never saw him in those dark clothes. The car tossed him onto the hood, and when the boy hit the brakes, Mr. Lawrence was thrown him back to the street and under the car.

While he was in the hospital I looked after the red house, showing rooms to prospective tenants, collecting rent, answering calls. I roamed about the space we had shared, which had grown musty without Mr. Lawrence's efforts at opening doors and windows. Now it was too cold. The oil heater brought memories of my childhood winters, ticking away with strange rooms, foreign faces and voices, the intimidation of new air. I strayed from studies and sat at the kitchen table, sometimes in the dark, sipping from a bottle of Old Crow I'd bought in Mr. Lawrence's absence. I heard his bark as he lost himself in a tall story. We had become easy friends, the easiest I had yet known. He told his stories and I listened. He asked me about school, about my family, and I had little to say, reluctant to raise my voice without a drink or two. I shrugged and he nodded. We wore our old clothes and were comfortable with the silence between us.

In a few weeks he was home, greeting a handful of visitors from a wheel chair in the parlor with the same offhand remark: "They took off my legs since I last saw you."

Mr. Lawrence's sister had flown up from Utah to be with him. I stayed with them until the end of spring when the school year was over. His sister had talked him into a rest home. Mr. Lawrence grumbled at first but gave in to the idea.

"Can't dance and it's too wet to plow," he told me on the day I left. We shook hands on the sidewalk, at the curb where he had been airborne. It was the first time we had touched each other. His hand was large and warm and had done it all. He held on to mine and closed. The old red house seemed to be fading as I stood over him. I moved back to Seattle. It's a tall city and I belonged there.

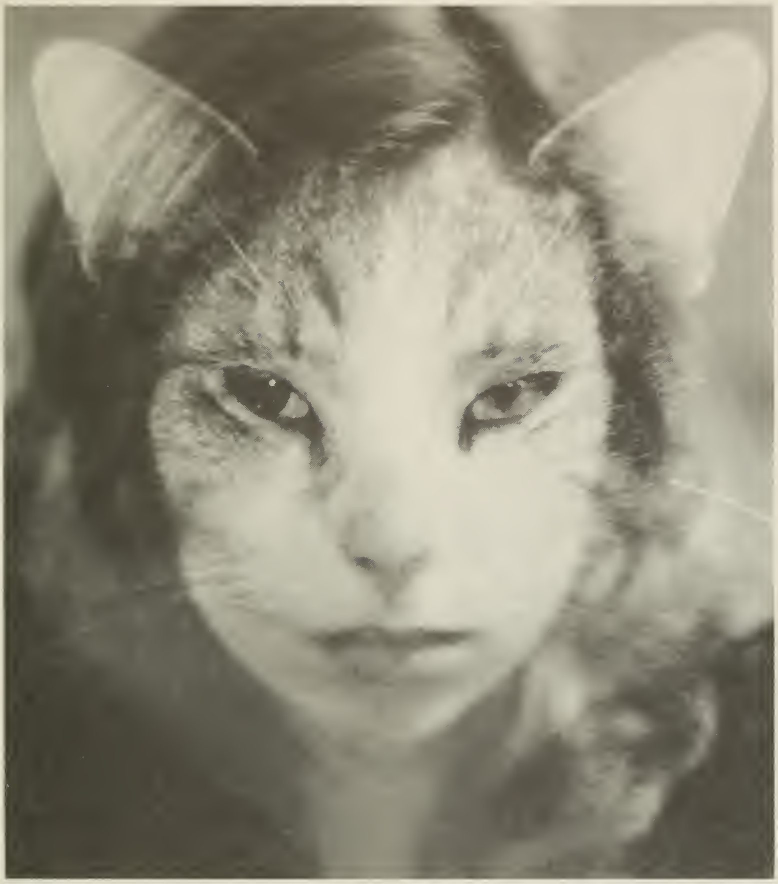
Monolith

Des Purcell

My Silver Panther

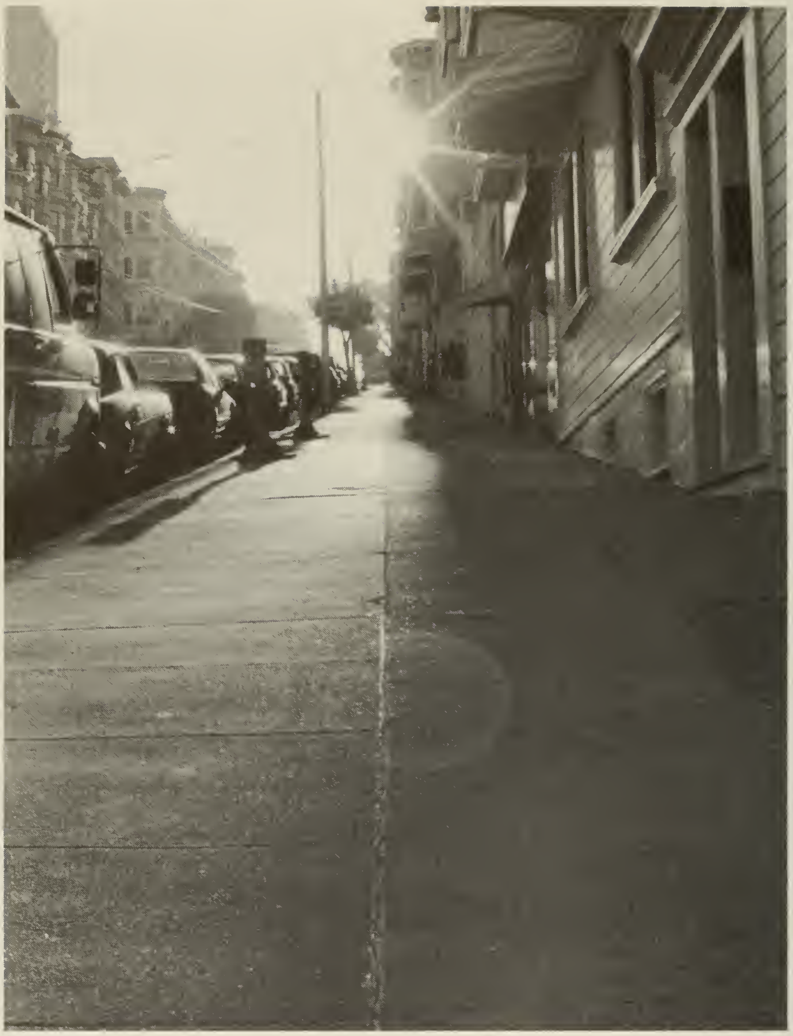
My silver panther
closes his warm amber eyes
to sleep during the noon day heat
so he can hunt during the night.
In his sleep, all tension escapes his body;
he purrs his way into sweet dreams
of successful hunts. He looks as innocent
as a newborn kitten--sweet, fresh, and cuddly. His heart
is open to your pain and fears. His friendship is a protector
from the storms that overtake the fields of my life.
When he awakes, he stretches; his muscles
move to a beautiful choreographed dance as light
and shadows play among the planes of his skin. He snuggles
closer to me fighting the urges of wakefulness. I can feel
his heartbeat and spirit grow as he slowly awakens.
But when he is awake, he is a hunter of the night.
He is most alive at night with the moonlight streaming and
glowing down on his silver hair. He moves with an ease of
self awareness. He moves in and out of the shadows of
the night on a prowl looking for a successful hunt. Watchful
eyes always aware of who and what is around him.
Beware of his amber eyes, for if you stare into them too long,
he mesmerizes and pulls you in for the taking. A faint glimmer
of playfulness always sparkles in his eyes. He is open one
minute to your affections and loving. I seize the moment to
hold and soothe him. His hair is short and stubbly,
but feels like silver satin to the eager fingertips. As I
massage his neck, he relaxes his defenses. For that brief
moment, I can feel his spirit. I feel his thoughts, pain,
frustrations, fears, passions, and loves. Suddenly, he pulls
away, leaving me shaking from all the intense sensations I
feel. With a blink of an eye, he is aloof and distant, but
always demanding my attention.

Treva Fitzgerald



Catgirl

Renee Hill



Sunset Boulevard
Des Purcell

A Pot of Jonquils

Each day he wears
a clean white shirt
his wife washes
and starches for him.

He keeps plotted photo
contracts in his briefcase.
He snaps the lock shut and
applies after-shave lotion.

Dressed in blue suit, he waves
to her, then travels
over bumpy, rural clay roads
visiting old widows.

This week the back of
his black automobile
is filled with pots of yellow
jonquils sitting side by side.

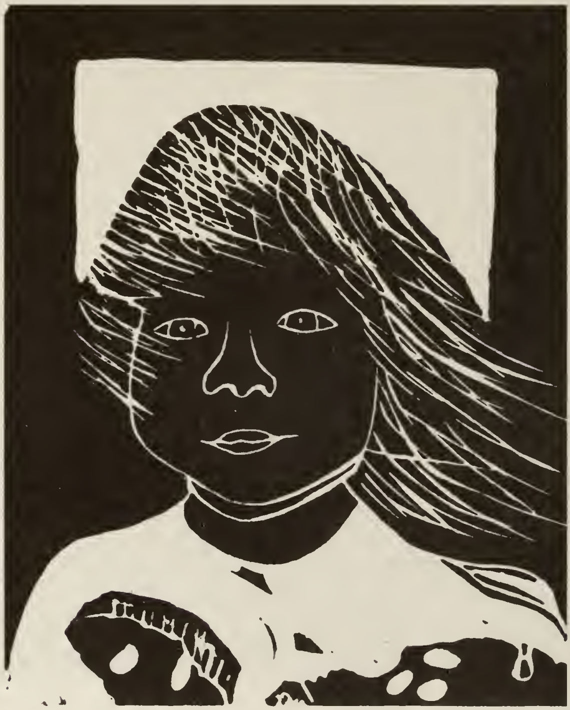
If each woman gives him
two names of close friends
(only widows will do),
he gives client a gift.

His fresh white shirt, dark
blue suit and after-
shave fragrance plus
boyish grin nail the sale.

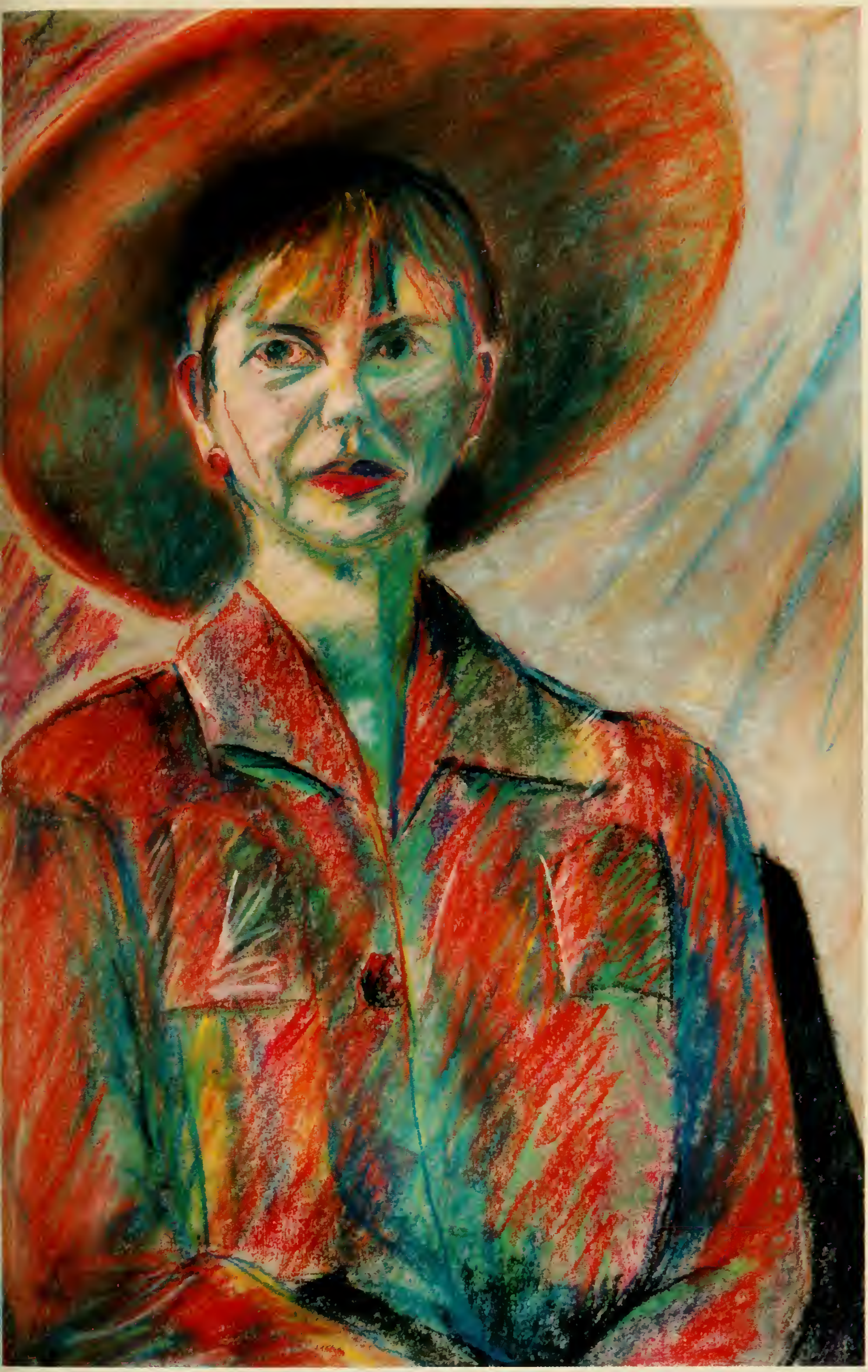
When he shows Widow Jane
serene scene, she gives names,
signs on dotted line and gets
a pot of yellow jonquils.

The scene of measured plots,
green grass and shade trees,
is cemetery, where
I wait for widows to die.

Rachel Brown



Windblown Ivy with Watermelon Shirt
Phil Kandell



Elle
Eva Martha Madsen

Straight Jackets

David Marshall

The first time I actually heard "They're Coming to Take Me Away," I was in the University of Massachusetts Medical Center — psychiatric ward. We were eating breakfast. WIXV, the local classic rock station, was running a contest to see if anyone could identify it. I could (my sister used to hum it), but the nurses didn't let me call. But that was okay. It gave me and Josh something to bitch about. We were both there for suicide attempts.

We always had to have something to bitch about. Not because there was really anything wrong, but because during the morning meeting the patients were supposed to bring up any problems so they might be discussed in a healthy manner. It was all part of becoming functional people — that's what Lily, the head nurse, said.

We were eating breakfast when Dan walked in. We were all pretty surprised to see Dan out of his room. He was normally confined there because he would wander off.

"Good morning, Dan," I said. "It's good to see you out and about again."

"Hi, God," Dan said. Dan was psychotic.

"Are you joining us for breakfast, Dan?" I said.

"Maybe physically, but Dan will never join us," said Josh. I ignored Josh.

"Yeah. I'm here for breakfast," said Dan.

Dan walked over to the long table at the end of the day room to find his tray. He just stared at all the trays like he was waiting for his to stand up and shout, "Me, take me!" I went to the table and found his tray for him.

"Here, Dan, this one is yours."

Dan held his hand out to shake mine; he liked shaking hands. I think it assured him that we were real. I put his tray in his hand and patted his shoulder.

"Thanks, God."

"Come on, Dan." We walked over to the table where Josh and I were sitting. Before Dan would sit down I had to take his tray and set it on the table with the fork, knife, and spoon set up in a row to the right of the tray.

Josh watched us. "What a screw-up," he said.

"Shut up," I said. Josh shot me an angry look. Most people avoided Josh because hehad almost killed someone in a dissociative fit. Supposedly his mind shut down when he got angry and he would attack people. He was all talk. We all were.

I sat down across from Dan and looked into his eyes. They were empty. Dan walked like his soul had fled and his body was trying to remember how to repeat daily processes. The three of us sat and ate in silence.

I had just taken Dan's and my trays back to the long table at the end of the day room and sat back down when Lily came in with Nick, my therapist. They were going to lead the morning meeting.

"Alright, everybody. Please sit down." Lily looked around the room to see who wasn't there. "Andy, Nancy, and Pete are here," she said. Lily reminded me of that woman on Romper Room who looked through her magic mirror to see all the kids in TV land.

"Where's Mike and Trina? Are they coming?" asked Lily. "Well, we'll start without them." Lily noticed Dan sitting next to me. "Dan, should you be here?"

"Yeah! He's the craziest one of all. Of course he should be here." Josh laughed at his own joke.

"Enough, Josh," said Lily, "Dan, please go back to your room." Nick got up and walked over to Dan. Taking him by the arm, he led Dan out.

"Now," said Lily, "does anyone have an issue to bring up today?"

"Yes," I said, "why couldn't I call the radio station?"

"Will, you are here to learn to live a healthy, functional life, not make phone calls to DJ's."

"That's part of living a healthy life. It's making contact with other people," I said.

"Yes, it is. But not meaningful contact."

"Please define meaningful contact." Being a college student, I liked to challenge their ideas and force them to think.

"Please, Will. You're being difficult," Lily said.

"No. I think I deserve an answer."

"Will, I'm not going to put up with this. Why are you acting out? You're never like this."

"Because I think I should have some say in what I do," I said.

"You do."

"Bullshit."

"Will, go to your room," said Lily.

I did.

I sat on my bed and ran through the rest of the morning meeting in my head. Mike would walk in late and complain that we only had four set times to smoke and he wanted more because he had nicotine fits. An argument would start and Lily would say that the discussion would continue tomorrow.

I sat on my bench and watched Dan, who was in the room across from me. He kept wandering around. Nick was still with him, trying to get him to sit down and draw or something. But Dan wanted to be out with everybody. Nick kept wiping his face and running his fingers through his hair. I think he was frustrated with Dan.

"Ed, can you get a coat for Dan?" Nick asked in a shout. I smiled. They were taking Dan for a walk. He deserved it.

I got up and walked to the door of my room. Ed, the male nurse, was running down the hall. In his hand was a white coat. Across the hall, Nick had gotten Dan to sit on the bed. Ed walked in and unfolded the coat. Its sleeves were long. With buckles.

"Hold your arms out, Dan," said Nick. Dan did.

Ed walked over and slid the jacket on Dan, who stared across the hall at me. His eyes were still empty. He had become a lamb, trusting sadistic shepherds. Bill pulled Dan's arms across his chest and began to buckle the sleeves to the back.

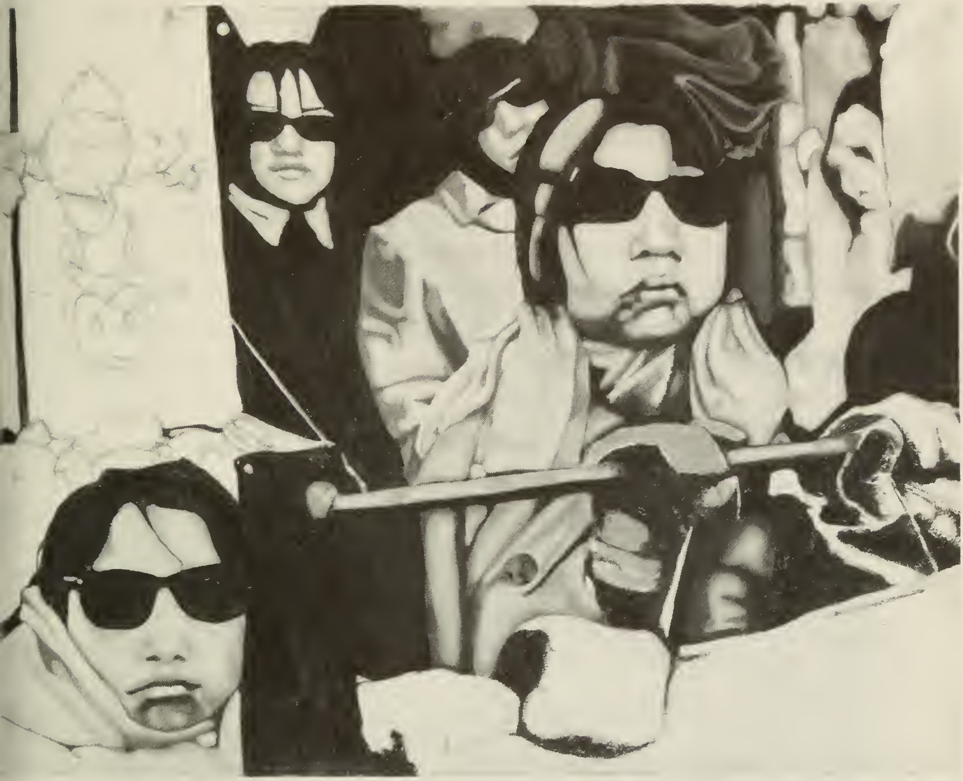
"No!" said Dan, "you can't do this." His eyes filled with tears. "God. Help me."

I tried to move. I was powerless. Tears steamed down my face.

"Let him go, Nick," I said.

Nick looked at me. "Shut your door, Will."

I did.



Shades

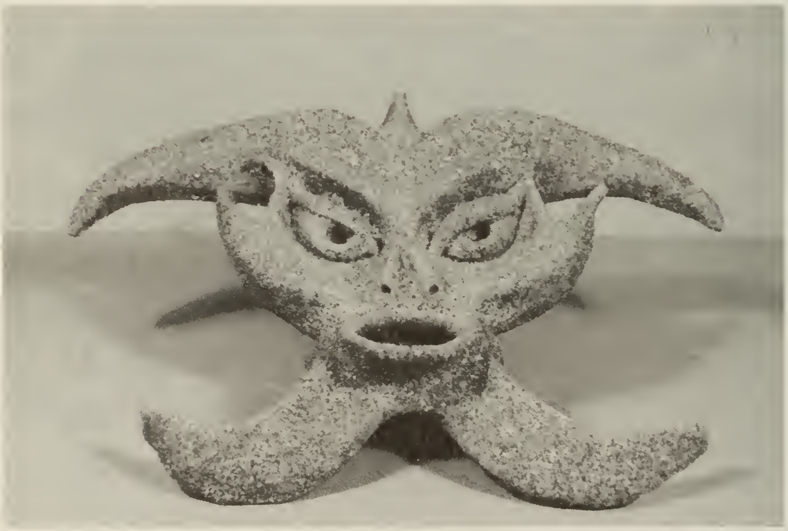
Julie B. Hodge

To Finish Where Poe Left Off

One night in a drunken slumber,
I was awoken by a plunder.
"What the hell could it possibly be?"
Was the only thought that occurred to me.
Could it be that mutt next door;
No, it was that wretched raven crying, "nevermore."

I had had enough of this foul mouthed bird;
To put up with this just seemed absurd.
"How to deal with this devil," in my mind kept clicking;
Now I can honestly say, "raven tastes like chicken."
I sent him back to "Night's Plutonian Shore,"
And that bird will bother me "nevermore."

Kenneth Johnson



Childhood Dreams

Renee Hill

Just Desserts

Freya Roseane Poller

On the day that Aaron Wolf Johnson decided to kill his wife, he went to the grocery store and bought a grocery basket full of the most sumptuous food.

As he drove his Volvo out of their circular driveway, he imagined walking up and down the aisles, coveting and fondling the most exotic foods.

"Papaya nectar. . .," he murmured as he came to the stop sign at the end of Lighthouse Pointe Drive. He smacked his lips thoughtfully, imagining the taste of the thick, pink, viscous liquid.

"Four years! Coupon cutting! Scrimping! Pinching!" He hit the steering wheel in his frustration and barely missed hitting two kids on bikes. They gaped as he distractedly regained control of the car. His knuckles whitened from his grip on the wheel.

"Macadamia nuts. Ah, what delights. Eleven dollars a pound. I will leave a pile of nutshells on the Country Geese Simulated Pine Table. Maybe she'll keel over from that alone." He licked his lips in anticipation.

In his excitement, Aaron failed to notice stop signs, neglected to use turn signals, and sped with the most blinding fury to Harris Teeter, his favorite grocery store. He made it to the store unscathed; he had the sheer will of someone giddy with the excitement of killing his wife.

He sat panting in his Volvo in the grocery parking lot. His shaky hands reached up for the rearview mirror. A little this way, there. Nice face, not bad as a whole. He looked into his own eyes.

Hopelessly bloodshot.

"Visine. . .check," he said aloud as he added to his list. "And a train for Bobby, and a dolly for Suzie, and for my Miranda, a meal to die for!" he sang gleefully as his ticker tape list unfurled into his lap.

"I don't look like the type who would kill his wife," he reassured himself in the mirror. "Such a nice nose and a kindly mouth," he said, practicing smiles and grimaces.

He ran shaky fingers through his limp hair and clutched at the scalp. "Maniacal? No, just a little harried. I'll comb it just in case."

Gray hairs in the comb.

"Not gray, silver. You are a very handsome man," he said into the rearview with perfect frankness. His reflection did not respond.

Once inside, Aaron found the most perfect grocery cart. It was an object of sheer beauty, all shiny chrome with superbly oiled wheels that all went the same direction at the same time. The bar grip was smooth and red, a color most conducive to shopping. The cart hummed quietly as it and Aaron moved out of the cart corral into Harris Teeter proper.

Aaron hummed along with his cart, a tuneless hum that propelled him in just the right direction, past the impulse-buying-trial-size-travel-sample-aisle. He wasn't in the mood to mess with piddly stuff.

On to produce!

"The more colors in a meal, the healthier to kill you with, my dear," he giggled as he felt the red, green, and yellow peppers for the perfect resilience. He chose two of each, at $1.29 a pound.

He chose endive, arugula, leeks, and escarole with equal fondness.

"Vitamin D! Beta carotene! Be sure you get plenty of greens," he called to a pale, goateed passerby.

The circular glasses turned to look at him.

"Thanks, man, you must really care."

Aaron smiled and turned his attention to cauliflower. No, snow peas. They have such a good crunch. He filled his bag and picked up a beautiful bulb of garlic.

"To keep vampires away," he thought, "but it won't do the littlest bit of good against me!"

He wore a wide smile as he loaded a perfect cantaloupe, two pomegranates, an ugli-fruit, an avocado, and two black plums into the basket. Lettuce, cucumber, tomatoes, and scallions for a small salad were added as an afterthought.

"I'll do her up in grand style. All seven courses. What for a soup?" he wondered as his cart rounded out of produce and into canned goods.

His trip through canned goods was short enough; he scoffed at the pre-fab meals.

"Miranda, my love, I know that you would disapprove, but I must forego the Cambell's for tonight. I shall feed you leek soup in high style."

He consulted his list. Veggies, taken care of. No canned foods that he really needed, so he could move to his favorite section, the ethnic food aisle.

He ran his fingers over the shiny packages of oriental noodles.

Where was that jar of curry?

The Seven Rajah brand of curry in the spicy variety was the item he lusted after every time he traveled this aisle.

There it was. It had a broken safety seal, and every time he came here, he opened it and took a sniff. Surreptitiously at first, but then long, blissful inhalations. At eight dollars for two ounces it was a little pricey, but—

"What the hell! You only live once, and some longer than others!" he crowed as a jar of curry with an unbroken safety seal took its place in the front of the basket, nestled in with the leaf lettuce. He gazed at it lovingly. This was not on his list, but he felt that he deserved it.

"Oh, Miranda, it feels so good to buy things that you would never approve of. I'm almost a free man," he thought. "I have longed for that curry for eons."

Aaron felt a small twinge of regret when he realized that he had almost finished his list. He was almost done shopping. Only dairy, sweets, and meats were left to purchase. But he forged on; he had a task to accomplish.

Aaron raced through dairy, grabbing ricotta cheese and smoked edam, plain lowfat yogurt and 2% milk. He also picked up eggs and neufchatel cheese. He moved quickly until he thought that he must look like those fools on "Supermarket Sweep." With the thought of that ridiculous game show, he slowed to an acceptable pace.

He made it to the baking aisle and got a bag of semi-sweet miniature M&M's. They were Miranda's favorite. He thought of her fondly, eating the entire two pound bag in one sitting. She did have some endearing traits.

Aaron felt a little sad when he realized he could never again hold her hand as she suffered a two pound M&M overdose.

Oh, well.

Aaron's last stop was at the meat section. He had special ordered a gorgeous turkey; eighteen pounds of perfection. It was a never-frozen beauty, all cold and goose-bumped. He watched as Kale the butcher wrapped the bird in white paper and taped it with plenty of white tape.

"Did you remember the cranberries for the stuffing?" asked Kale.

He received no answer because Aaron was clutching his turkey and heading in a beeline for the checkout.

The checkout girl had purple hair and a rather peculiar speech affectation.

"Wow, you're cooking up a killer meal, sir! That curry is to die for. I got some just last week, and I was in absolute heaven!" she said.

"You, Janine," Aaron said as he glanced at her tag, "you are absolutely dead on."

He got his change and fairly bounced out of the store.

Aaron was very careful driving home. His turkey sat in the passenger's seat. Aaron considered buckling the bird in, but decided against it.

"We wouldn't want anyone to think I was crazy, would we?"

No answer.

"It would be tragic to have bought all this lovely food and crash on the way home. The fates would have cheated me.

You'll be divine, Turkey. Few turkeys are destined for greater things." He patted the turkey and wiped the condensation on his pants.

"So many people are just frightfully dull about killing. They shoot or strangle or stab. And they always get caught. I am more clever. . .so clever. You will be my accomplice, but don't worry; they can't catch us!"

Aaron lowered his voice to a whisper. "You see, all I have to do is take some turkey fat, let it sit out for a few hours, and it will breed the most lovely, deadly food poisons! The only problem is how to have Miranda eat it without also getting sick myself. . .I haven't quite decided how to do it yet. . ." He mentally rearranged his plan as the Volvo rounded onto Lighthouse Pointe Drive.

The sign on his street jerked him out of his reverie. "I hate it! Lighthouse Point-E! Why can't they just spell it correctly? Miranda just loves the spelling. 'Oh, Baby, it's just so sophisticated sounding,' was what she said when we moved in."

"I guess it shows where her tastes lie," he told the turkey.

The turkey remained a silent accomplice. Aaron pulled into the circular driveway and spent the next fifteen minutes unloading his bags of groceries onto the kitchen counter.

He shuddered every time he opened the back door to see the powder blue geese honking "back door guests are best" under a powder pink, heart-shaped cartoon dialogue bubble.

After Aaron put away all the groceries, he brought his turkey out of the fridge. He cleaned it. "There, my little turkey. Let's get all those harmful bacteria off. We'll save them for the one who really deserves it!"

He spiced it. "Here's some parsley, and pepper, and an apple for your cavity. We have to fill it, my dear!"

He trussed it and tied it with the utmost care. "I don't mean to stifle you, but it must be done," he apologized. "Just think about what you will become and the mitzvah you will do."

He cleaned up his mess, wiped the counter very carefully with Clorox, and threw the scraps in the trash — but reserved about an ounce of fat and skin. He put it in a blue bowl with geese dancing around the rim. He took the bowl into the bedroom that he shared with Miranda and placed it in the upper left hand corner of the very highest shelf of their closet, next to the pink mink that she won for selling Mary-Kay cosmetics.

He heard the back door opening and almost fell off his step ladder.

He walked into the kitchen and greeted her.

“Hello, Miranda, how was your day?” Aaron smiled the most loving smile he could muster.

Miranda fixed one eye and a cocked eyebrow on him. She drew herself up to her full five feet three inches and placed a fist on her ample hip.

“What are you doing home? And what are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fixing a romantic, gourmet dinner for just the two of us,” Aaron cooed.

“But I picked up Stouffer’s chicken potpies on the way home!”

Aaron thought about people who killed and their motivation. Some people killed for revenge. Some killed for the experience of snuffing a life. He thought that another hideous Stouffer’s potpie was reason enough to legitimize his act.

“Don’t you like Miranda’s kitchen?” she demanded, tapping a pointy-shoed foot. “Oh, go ahead, but I want to know exactly how much money you spent on junk. Just remember that all these little extras come out of the account to buy our Country Touch living room group. You need to set some priorities.”

“And my day was fine,” she added. “Mary Kathryn said that I have the shiniest hair she’s ever seen. And I sold Miss Barkley a whole Day-To-Nite beauty set. She needs it to cover that pruney face just as much as we need the money. Especially since you decided to squander our income on junk!" she spat.

"All right, Miranda," Aaron sighed, "I'll be more careful. Look! I bought your favorite!" He singsonged, swinging the bag of M&M's he got for the express purpose of taming the savage beast.

"Oooh! You do love me!" squealed Miranda as she made a grab for the bag.

Aaron maneuvered out of her way and poured a handful into a goose cup. "This is all you can have right now. Don't spoil your appetite."

Miranda took the M&M's and a plastic cup of purple Kool-aid into the living room.

"There she goes. She's so classy," said Aaron, under his breath, of course. "I wish I could see some good qualities in her. She's just turned into such a flat character."

Full of motivation, and with renewed inspiration, Aaron set out to cook the most fantastic meal of their lives. He could smell his turkey accomplice growing tasty and brown in the oven. Aaron shivered with eagerness.

"I can't wait! I can't!" he said, partly to his turkey, partly to himself.

The problem of where to put the spoiled turkey fat was still a problem. In the leek soup? Miranda wandered in and sniffed the pot.

"It smells hideous. You know I hate the smell of cooking onions. It stinks up the house for weeks. What are those things floating in it?"

She stabbed at the soup with the wooden spoon.

So much for tainting the soup. Aaron went on to the other dishes. He blanched the peppers in olive oil and pushed them out of their skins. He stir-fried the snow peas with the fantastic curry. He carefully tore apart arugula, escarole, endive, and romaine lettuce for the green salad. He added cucumber, scallions, and a couple of Roma tomatoes for color. The pureed peppers combined with balsamic vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil made the dressing. He beat eggs, neufchatel, vanilla and sugar together to make flan, a Spanish egg custard.

He split the avocado and filled it with garnet sauce. The turkey aroma wafted through the house.

Miranda wandered in and out of the room, poking at the food and making faces.

Aaron's tolerance was deteriorating as Miranda scoffed at every dish. A little blue vein pulsed on his forehead each time Miranda proclaimed her distaste. He was running out of options.

"In the M&M's?" he wondered aloud.

Through the din of his cluttered head, Aaron heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door open. He noticed with exasperation that she didn't wash her hands — again. Miranda walked into the kitchen for more Kool-aid and Aaron knew what he must do.

Once Miranda was back on the couch and thoroughly engrossed in "her show," Aaron sneaked past the living room.

His body thrummed with adrenaline as he walked with a calculated nonchalance to their bedroom. Aaron felt for the pull chain. Where was it? Finally, he found it, and the miser bulb illuminated their — her closet. Aaron studied the frilly garments and looked at the pile of shoes. At last count there were thirty-one pairs. Would Goodwill make a house pickup when she was gone?

Aaron saw her senior yearbook, and began to leaf through it. He remembered, flipping through black and white photos, why he had loved Miranda in the beginning.

She had such a pretty smile, and a perfect flip at the bottom of her hair. Aaron used to tell his friends that he liked her for much more than her looks. He loved to brag about how she volunteered with the kids at the hospital and still had time to go with him to dinner at his grandmother's house.

He was especially proud that she could really carry a decent conversation. So few girls could do that.

"So what happened?" Aaron wondered, as he sighed and closed the book.

Aaron climbed the stepladder and saw the pink mink.

Next to it, in a little powder-blue dish, was the turkey fat. It had been sitting out for hours. Aaron sniffed and wrinkled his nose. It was definitely off. It should do the trick. The turkey consumer hotline warned against letting turkey sit out of refrigeration for even a few hours, and this one had been in a hot closet. Next to a pink mink!

He took the fat into the bathroom and dipped his index and middle fingers into the bowl. Like an accomplished artist, he spread a thin coat of grease on the toilet handle. It really did not feel much different from regular oils or shortening, but Aaron chuckled at the deadly difference.

"Serves her right for not washing her hands after. And it serves her right for all these damn geese," he said.

"It's funny how you never learn these things until you are married to someone. Things used to be so much different. I thought that marrying the homecoming queen was a real reward. It makes me sad that her personality deteriorated with her looks. She'll never know what hit her," he said as he washed his hands three times in hot water and anti-bacterial soap.

When Aaron called Miranda into the dining room, she took one look at the candles and flicked on the overhead light. Aaron pulled out a chair for Miranda, so she pulled out the one next to it and sat down.

Even this behavior did nothing to dim Aaron's spirits. He savored every drop of his leek soup — it was a Martha Stewart Recipe. The salad was delectable; he closed his eyes and inhaled the pungent pepper and balsamic vinegar dressing's aroma.

He ignored Miranda, who was pushing everything back and forth and around in an attempt to look busy.

He carved the turkey, brown and fragrant, and was pleasantly surprised that it came out so moist. He ate the turkey and kasha pilaf stuffing and thought of Martha Stewart and how proud she would be. His fantasies were fulfilled when he tasted the forbidden curried snowpeas.

Aaron was so involved in the act of eating that he almost forgot Miranda was there. She watched him murmur and sigh, and close his eyes and experience flavors and textures.

"You don't even sigh like that when I put on my Victoria's Secret's teddy," she whimpered, seeming very sad. Her sadness turned to anger fairly quickly when she noticed that Aaron didn't notice.

"Why can't you cook normal food?" she asked, "This tastes like shit!"

Aaron opened his eyes. He studied Miranda very carefully, as if she were a rare insect under glass.

He saw the stylish hair, dark at the roots. He saw the fastidiously applied makeup, a bit smeared around the eyes and mouth. He saw the angora sweater with a Kool-aid stain on the left breast.

It was droopier than it used to be.

"Eat some turkey, sweetie," Aaron murmured. "You like turkey, remember? It was your favorite at Thanksgiving."

Miranda looked at Aaron through mascara-smeared eyes and picked a piece of skin off the turkey. She nibbled at it and a little glob of grease dribbled down her chin.

Aaron wiped it off with his napkin and smiled at Miranda.

Miranda excused herself, and Aaron had a dish of flan with kahlua topping. He ate tiny bites, feeling every mouthful and giving it his full attention. When the flan was gone, Aaron ran his finger around the rim of the bowl, his bowl. It was a very pretty Chinese bowl, with trees and pagodas.

"I like pretty things," Aaron whispered.

Now all there was to do was wait. Aaron washed the dishes, pots, pans, and kitchen gadgets that contributed to his piece de resistance.

Miranda watched six television shows in a row, and Aaron smiled to hear the toilet flush between episodes. Miranda ate the remaining pound and three quarters of M&M's.

When she came into the kitchen with a stomachache, Aaron was very sympathetic.

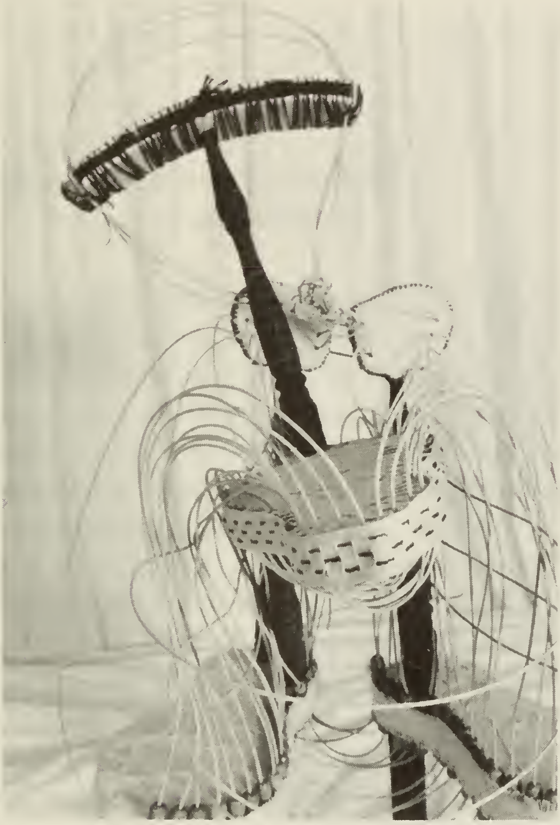
"Miranda, you probably just ate too much. It was good, wasn't it! Here's some Pepto." He thrilled inside to see her choke down the chalky pink.

An hour later, when she was sweaty, pale, and cramping, Aaron stroked her forehead.

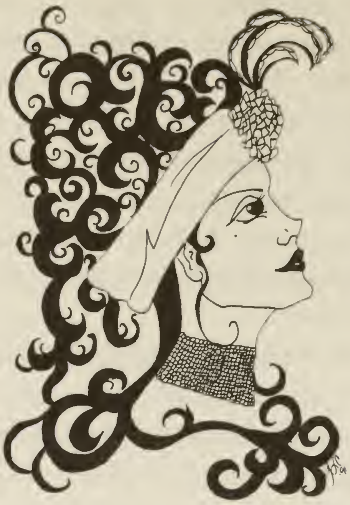
"Oh, my little goose. Maybe next time you won't eat two pounds of chocolate. If you don't feel better in the morning, we'll call the doctor."

Aaron tucked Miranda in and kissed her sweaty forehead.

He climbed into bed next to her, turned off his bedside lamp, and fell asleep.



Obsessive Compulsive
Karen Gwinner



Helena
Jennifer L. Cohen

Patty's Coming

Mary O'Sako

The peak of Marcy's initial excitement over the fresh news of her sister's impending visit took a downward spiral as she stared at the *Justin Elementary School Calendar* on her refrigerator door. She'd circled April fifth with red ink, and now it glared in mocking contrast to the white of the page. *Two weeks Marcy, two weeks*, it may as well have shouted to her. "Oh, no!" Marcy wailed. "Only two weeks?! Oh, *hell* no!"

She fingered the edge of the latest canvas upon which she'd been painting and looked around the room frantically. The entire house bore the evidence of her family's hectic lives like a cluttered vaudeville stage *after* a long night of performances. Half of the kitchen table currently served as lab to Mathew's science project, Sarah's scout uniforms were still piled in a basket by the table awaiting alterations, and David's daily newspapers were crammed to bursting beneath the sofa.

Marcy herself was equally guilty, with the brushes, tubes and bottles of her craft piled haphazardly in the corner of the room like the spoils of a rummage sale.

"Well, *Scarlet*, you can't just think about this tomorrow or you *will* go crazy!" Marcy soliloquized. The cuckoo clock above the mantle chimed eleven. She had exactly three hours until the bus dropped off her children and six until David pulled into the driveway. *Let's hit it!* Without pausing to remove the dried paint from her fingers, she scooped up a pile of half empty paint tubes and tossed them into a box, then hauled several bundles of David's old newspapers out to the car. The sight of the vacuum cleaner sent Edward, their mutt, slinking up the stairs in search of more tranquil surroundings. "Traitor!" she yelled after him.

As Marcy cleaned, she scrolled through that morning's conversation with her sister in her mind, trying to weigh the contents and sift through the details. Something more than the tiny wave of excitement over the arrival of a houseguest of her sister's magnitude was swelling inside her.

"Hey, Marcy! Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm finally coming to visit you, sweetie!"

"Sure, sure you are," Marcy snickered and balanced the phone on one shoulder while she added a dab of dark color to the center of some sunflowers she was painting. "What's going on, Pat?"

"I am. *We* are. Don has some days off from work at Easter, and we decided it was high time to fly out to see you folks! God, I'm so excited. Just think, Marcy, I finally get to see *all* of you, together, in the same room. Think of the time we'll have!"

"I hope *so*! It's been too long. Mathew and Sarah have grown so tall! And David and I are just getting on with it. Wait, are you sure you and Don don't have some other foreign locale to jet-set off to?"

"Cute. *No* , sister, we have no prominent commitment except you. Don't you think it's time? I'm ashamed we haven't made it thus far! And I'll bet you look fabulous! Just think, we can go to the movies together, shop. . .the *beach!* You guys *do* have access to a beach out there somewhere?"

"Of course we do, although it's a little cool yet. But it's great for walking. This is so, so. . .I just can't believe you're *coming!*" She smeared more dark paint into the sunflower and smoothed it out toward the edges to add a shadow to the garden she'd painted.

"Well, we are, and you're on! Just tell that handsome husband of yours to move over 'cause here we come!"

What's it been, Patty, five years? Six? She mused as she dusted the framed pictures in the dining room. She paused over Patty and Don's wedding photo. Her sister was a sleek, golden creature clinging gracefully to Don's arm. "*Don,* who'd ever thought," she sighed wistfully before returning the portrait into its nest atop the buffet with the others.

The beach, you always did love the beach, Patty, and why not? She paused in front of the full length mirror in their bedroom and put down the clothes basket she'd been carrying on her hip. You have that olive complexion from Dad, *while I,* she peered closely at her face, *am Mommy's girl, freckled marshmallow all the way.*

Marcy removed her top and pants and studied herself more closely. She had become too comfortable of late in her thirty-five year old skin, and she was forever postponing the inevitable diet. She told herself there was always tomorrow, or that David never complained, or they were just plain too busy. The body in the mirror told a different tale, a sobering one of too many helpings and too many Friday night pizzas.

Marcy let down her tangled mass of red hair and thought about Patty's own black tresses. A long forgotten summer afternoon came to her suddenly. Patty was laughing and running down the beach on legs that were tanned perfection. She was in pursuit of Don, the bodyguard, who'd stolen her towel. "Help me get him, *Dave* !" Patty had squealed, her hair streaming down her back in an ebony waterfall. David, whom Marcy had recently begun dating, stared after them with a wolf-like grin as he sat quietly with Marcy beneath the shade of an umbrella. Marcy listened to their cavorting with ever-reddening ears while she sketched in the sand. She was steaming beneath that umbrella, a T-shirt protecting her skin and the frizz of her hair caught up in a ponytail.

Marcy swallowed and turned to the right and then left to examine her profile. Her breasts were fine, but things were a veritable down-hill sled ride from there. Her belly, streaked lightly with silver stretch marks and slackened with eighteen months of childbearing, hung softly over the tops of her panties while her thighs and buttocks took up the slack below.

"Two weeks," Marcy muttered and pulled her sweats back on. She slid a box of loose photos from beneath the bed, digging until she found the most recent one of Patty. It was the one taken two years ago on the beach in California: the one where she looked like an exotic creature from Bora-Bora or somewhere; the one David had whistled long over when he'd pulled it from the Christmas card they'd sent. "You're on," she muttered.

"But, Mom, why'd you stick it on the fridge?" asked Sarah that afternoon, her hazel eyes huge beneath hair as bright as Marcy's.

"It's so she'll know we've been thinking of her," Marcy lied.

"Weird," Mathew snickered before galloping from the room with Edward close on his heels.

"Weird? No way. Aren't there enough pictures on display through the rest of the house? Besides, I consider the fridge a place of honor. It's where I put *your* stuff."

Sarah shrugged politely, her attention already shifting gears in the chameleon way of eight year olds. She kissed the back of Marcy's hand with a loud smack and skipped away. Marcy raised her eyebrows and gritted her teeth.

"To all of us, a dish to prove my worthiness of *certain* worldly palates," she giggled and toasted the photo with a package of tofu, which she deftly began to hack into. *Tofu.* The truth was Marcy had never laid hands on tofu until that afternoon, when she'd sped across the street to the *Food King* to make it her sole purchase after having seen it on a cooking show. The celebrity chef who'd handled it had been of "*world class status*," the invisible announcer had assured his television audience. "World class," Marcy repeated slowly. Soon she was well into the process of creating a low calorie, gourmet delight that she was certain would dazzle her family's taste buds. Marcy began to whistle. *Patty and Don are certainly 'world class' in* ***their*** *existence, flying all over with that job of his.*

"It's stir-fry, with *tofu*," Marcy explained proudly at dinner. She carefully placed the evening's masterpiece on the center of the table before her speechless family. "I got it straight from *The Fabulous Chefs of America.* It's a *world class* dish."

"Is it burnt?" Mathew asked, squinting up at her with his father's brown eyes as a pungent odor laced the steam from Marcy's masterpiece, saturating the space around them.

"No, it isn't *burned.* I most certainly would not serve you anything that was not cooked to perfection," she responded with false cheer, glancing across the table to where David, still in his shirt and tie from work, was leaning over a *Mechanics* magazine propped conspicuously against his dish. "It's very tasty, you'll see!" She kicked at David's foot.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, I hear *Arnold* eats this stuff every night out in Hollywood!" He boomed emphatically without looking up. Mathew and Sarah shuddered beneath a spell of noisy laughter.

"I bet Aunt Patty likes this stuff; you can cook it for her when she comes, Mom! She lives in California like a *real* movie-star!" Sarah announced with a huge grin.

"She sure does," David murmured, sliding his magazine under his seat.

"Yes," Marcy agreed, trying not to wince over her first forkful.

David finally felt the daggers she was throwing him with her eyes. He also took a bite and began to cough. He grabbed his water and quickly swallowed several mouthfuls while Marcy glared at him over the jostling forms of the children. He smiled sheepishly.

"Well, this is the best tofu stir-fry *I've* ever eaten," Marcy chirped.

After giving in to an added entree of tuna fish sandwiches for the kids, Marcy cursed Dave silently when he retreated to the den to plant his male-thin buttocks in his chair. She hurriedly rinsed the last plate and crammed the dishwasher full to the explosion point.

"You guys want to earn some money?" Marcy bent over Sarah and Mathew's prone forms in front of the television.

"Yes!" Sarah answered brightly while Mathew shrugged.

"All right then. Your rooms, clean 'em. Maybe start with your dresser drawers first. I will be in to inspect when you are finished. Now, go or you won't have time for your favorite show later!" Sarah jumped up immediately, the tiny, plastic animal she'd been dissecting falling from her body like bright rain. She skipped lightly ahead of her trudging brother on their way up the stairs.

Marcy turned off the television and faced David alone.

"Lot needs done around here, don't you think, *baby*?"

"Certainly," he mumbled, flicking his gaze from newspaper, to her, then back again in the time it takes a cloud to flit over the moon. Marcy edged over to where he sat and jerked lightly on the corner of his paper.

"I'm going out for a walk, *Dad*. Would you mind watching over your spawn *and* the house for an hour please?"

"Walk? Isn't it getting dark?" he observed absently.

"Yes. You gonna fess up and play ball?"

"All you had to do was ask." He frowned and scratched at his short beard.

"I am."

"Thought you were going to paint."

"Later," Marcy yelled over her shoulder. She closed the door softly behind her.

Marcy headed for *Justin Memorial Park*, where she sweated the first of many nights of laps around the lake, ignoring her rumbling belly and the number of svelte runners who bounded like a herd of gazelle past a lumbering water buffalo. An enviably thin girl with long, black hair like Patty's brushed into her as she glided by.

"Sorry," she breathed back at Marcy.

"S'okay," Marcy huffed. *Miss hair and ass!* Her face reddened and she thought about Patty.

"We'll be like two peas in a pod. Blood friends forever, Marcy." Patty's ten-year-old voice sang sweetly in her ear. Marcy had then watched anxiously as Patty blossomed ahead of her, outgrowing her. She went from a pony-tailed bosom buddy into a Cleopatra almost overnight, leaving Marcy to flounder alone.

"Your sister is *too cool,*" David had told her the first night she'd brought him home to meet her family.

"*Cool,*" Marcy muttered. She chugged along painfully until a cold breeze that smelled of rain sent her home.

Later that evening, when they were alone and she and David had finished stowing the last child away for the night, he asked if she would join him in just a "tiny" scoop of vanilla ice cream.

"No way," she answered through a tiny yawn. She leaned against the sink, narrowing her eyes and waiting. He paused before Patty's languid figure before retrieving the tub of ice cream from the freezer.

"Sure?" He held a loaded bowl toward her.

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm watching."

"Watching?"

"My weight. I've grown softer than I ever thought I'd be. Besides, don't you think it's time you had the sex-kitten, beach-bunny type you've always *secretly* yearned for?"

"What?" David sputtered in an effort to keep from laughing. White droplets clung to his beard like milk. Marcy automatically handed him a napkin.

"You laugh?"

"I'm sorry Marcy, it's the *way* you said it, that's all." He mopped at his beard and winked before returning to the den where he slid back into his chair. Marcy followed close behind. "Don't worry, if you keep cooking stuff like that there tofu, something tells me we will all be dropping weight like bad news."

"I liked my tofu stir-fry. It was very, very *haute couture."*

"Very *what* ?" His eyes crinkled in amusement.

Marcy ignored him and continued, "It's easy for you, isn't it, *Mr. Tight-Buns* ?" She slapped his thigh.

"Whatever. Guess the kids and I are an unsophisticated bunch, strictly meat and potatoes," he mumbled around the last large spoonful.

"Well, I suppose I can spare you-all. But *I'm* going to stay on the race track. My sister will see she isn't the only one with *chic*."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Well, just don't lose too much of this, my *tofu-queen,*" he patted her rear and put down his bowl. "I like it."

Marcy snatched the bowl from her recently oiled coffee table and reached with her free hand to tug at his beard.

"*Well* , you should lose a *lot* of this. I don't think my sister and her husband are into lycanthropy, darling."

"No?"

"*No*."

"*Touché* ," he whispered before retrieving his magazine and propping his feet. Marcy didn't hear. She'd gone to pull out her box of acrylics and the half colored canvas. It was a commission from Mrs. Spencer next door.

"Put a real heavy looking cow in the middle of a garden; I want everyone who eats at my table to notice it!" Mrs. Spencer had told her the previous week. *I'll make it heavy all right*, thought Marcy. She glanced back into the den where David's magazine obliterated his face, then fished out a tube from which she squeezed a puddle of black onto her clean palette, thus allowing the painting to encompass her until long after he'd gone to bed and the only semblance of life left in the room was Edward, who lay stretched out beneath her chair until she put away the last brush and turned off the lights.

Patty's long, tanned phantom held court over Marcy's activities for the next several days. Marcy managed to keep her at bay with furious hours of dusting, rearranging, mopping, and jogging. She took the children with her on her forced journey to reassess order in her house: one night they sorted clothing, the next it was toys. And always they responded to her nightly forays with assorted grumbling while David followed along aimlessly, allowing Marcy to give him the occasional nudge with a nonchalance that made her stomach tighten. Marcy felt dizzy with relief when she'd finally coaxed him into finishing minor repairs in the guest bathroom.

"Here," she reached to steady the towel rack he was tightening. "Do you think it's straight?"

"Of course it is." He pressed into the screwdriver as it whined to a stop before setting up the next screw.

"Are you sure? You wouldn't want to commit to a finish and find it's crooked, would you?"

David paused and looked at her tiredly. "Take it easy, Marcy. *You're* the one who wanted to tear the place apart. I'm doing the best I can. I checked, and it *is* straight. I wouldn't have put it up if it weren't. Have a little faith, would ya?"

"Sorry, I'm, I'm just nervous about Patty's coming and I want things to look their best," she sighed.

"I know, I know." He shook his head and leaned into the task once more.

Something in the quivering slant of his shoulder brought back the night she'd first seen Patty with Don. Marcy had spent that smoldering afternoon straightening her hair and had finished by pulling on her new *hot pink* blouse. *Hot pink*, it had been the latest fad in teendom that summer, and Marcy felt it had been discovered for her alone. When Don had finished mowing her parents' lawn out back, she was ready. She'd tip-toed breathlessly down the back stairs only to find them wrapped tightly together against the pantry wall. Patty and Don, her Don, together. And they'd never even seen her. She stayed just long enough to see Patty's hair become enmeshed in his moving form, some of the long strands sticking to his moist shoulder like tentacles.

Marcy retreated to the kitchen where Sarah was coloring a "*Welcome Aunt Patty and Uncle Don*" poster. She fingered her orange tresses and watched Sarah's busily pumping fingers smudge Patty's name across the page in bright red.

"That's *perfect*, honey," she commented softly before turning to pull out the fixings for that evening's dinner.

"Are we eating gloom again?" Sarah asked in a high voice.

"*What* ? Oh! Nope, just plain old *throw in the oven* chicken. And that's *gourmet*, Sarah, not *gloom*." Marcy began to rip the skin from the chicken she was preparing.

"Mathew says it's gloom," Sarah muttered primly. The phone rang before Marcy could reply. It was her mother. She set the baking sheet down loudly and listened to her mother talk about the weather, Dad's gout, and the last bridge game before she finally intervened.

"Mom, have you talked to Patty?"

"Oh, yes and she's so excited about coming out there to New Hampshire, dear. It's great you girls can get finally together. I can't believe that either of you couldn't have gotten yourselves up for the trip long before this. And you were so *close* as children. I just don't know about you kids," she sighed.

"Yes, I know what you mean. Listen, when did you last *see* Patty? We were so excited I forgot to ask her how they were. She *looked* okay, didn't she? Everything is fine with them?" Marcy spoke quickly, taking tiny nibbles of celery in between sentences.

"What? Oh, Patty looks gorgeous; she *always* does.

That's so nice to worry about your sister like this, but really, Marcy, they are *fine*. Don is still climbing the ladder and all, and you know how they like to live high off the hog! Now what's this all about?"

"Nothing. Like you said, I was worried. Well, yeah, great, I *am* glad to hear that all is okay," she answered weakly. "It's just been such a long time since I've seen her, that's all."

"Well, you always *were* a *worry-wart*."

Yeah, a real worry-wart all right, Marcy thought dismally as David rushed through the kitchen with his tool box and slammed the door to the garage closed behind him.

That evening, Marcy stayed an extra hour at the park, walking out her last mile and relishing the slice of moon that wavered in and out of view behind black, stubborn clouds. When she got home the lights in the den were dimmed and David was sitting erect on the sofa. A cup of fragrant coffee was steaming on a coaster before him.

"Did you have a good run?" David spoke quietly and pointed to the sleeping form of Sarah, her body curled up and covered before the silent television set. Marcy smiled and nodded. She knelt and warmed her hands on his cup.

"Sarah was worried so I let her stay up."

"Thank you."

"You gonna paint awhile?" He leaned back into the sofa, his freshly shaven face half illuminated by the light from the lamp. Marcy swallowed. His chin, buried for so long, was strong and angular beneath the kind slant of his lip. All of his features seemed to blend in a pale, almost painterly way she'd long forgotten.

"Yes," she answered quickly and felt herself blush. She turned her face away and touched the tip of Sarah's toe.

"I'll get her." David rose and lifted Sarah's limp form.

"Thanks, David," Marcy breathed. He nodded and moved heavily towards the stair, Sarah's bright head dangling from his shoulder. Edward stretched from his spot beneath the coffee table and trotted slowly after them. "Edward?" she called and clicked her tongue. Edward paused. Glancing back, he wagged his tail apologetically before ambling on. *Traitor.* Marcy finished David's coffee when he didn't return and pulled out her paints.

The afternoon before Patty and Don's scheduled arrival came swiftly. Marcy found a quiet moment after dinner to slip into her bathroom for the long anticipated private inventory before the mirror. She stripped and stared at her reflection. Her stomach *seemed* less protuberant, but to her it only accentuated the bubble in her rear. She stepped on the scale for the first time in almost two weeks and waited for the red needle to catch on one of the magic numbers swaying behind it. When it finally settled, she stared in disbelief. *Only five pounds*? She stepped off, then on again. She quickly dressed and retrieved a five pound bag of sugar from the kitchen and placed it on the scales. *Five pounds.* She weighed herself a third time. Finally, she sighed and donned her sweats.

"Can we come?" Mathew and Sarah chorused, bounding on coltish pre-teen legs when they saw her emerge from the bedroom, tennis shoes in hand. David joined them from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a damp dish towel.

"Okay."

"You sure?" David smiled. "They might hold you back."

"I'm sure. Besides, I think they'll be miles ahead by the time I finish."

"C'mon, Mom!" Mathew bellowed.

"All right, all ready," Marcy yelled back. She sat heavily beside David on the sofa, tucking her feet reluctantly into her shoes, distantly aware of the news that had been flashing quietly on the television. It signed off in a flash of light and an info-mercial took its place. An actress whose name Marcy couldn't recall was touting the praises of being a *real* woman with *real* curves. She stood regally in front of a wardrobe of brightly colored sweaters and blouses, advertising her latest string of fashions for full figured women, *guaranteed to take ten pounds from your appearance*. Marcy paused, entranced. The fuzzy sweaters and sleek black pants *did* make the models look more slender than their *before* shots. "Available now at your local mall merchant," the beaming actress assured her television audience .

"David, I forgot, I have an errand to run," Marcy announced suddenly. She tugged eagerly at the laces of the last shoe.

"Errand?" he echoed, his eyebrows arched painfully on his forehead.

"Yes, *errand.* I need to run to the mall for something. There are some last minute things I have to do. Please, would you mind watching the kids for a little while?"

"Sure. I guess so." He flashed her a questioning glance.

"Thanks, just remember, no junk food for the kids, and have Mathew start his bath. And try not to mess up anything, you guys know how long it took to get this place into shape, right?" David nodded and said nothing. Marcy grabbed her purse and kissed him on one smooth cheek, ignoring the disappointed cries from Mathew and Sarah when they stuck their heads in the door to see what was keeping her.

"Hey, pick up some vanilla ice cream on your way back, would ya?" David's voice followed her out into the night.

Marcy made a straight line for the nearest mall. She strolled purposefully through its bright corridors, ignoring the tempting aromas from the cookie store as she browsed the neighboring plate glass windows of the women's clothing stores. Finally, through a jungle of endless anorexic-sized mannequins, she spotted a poster of the actress she'd just seen on television.

"But, surely you don't need the *plus* fashions. You don't have much to hide, dear," a saleswoman with her hair in a french twist insisted when she found Marcy pawing through the soft, bright colors.

"Oh, yes, I *do*," Marcy answered firmly, quickly choosing a fuchsia sweater. She pulled it from the rack and held it in front of her.

"Well, if you insist," the saleswoman remarked blandly. "Now, *that* is a wonderful color, the *fuchsia*." She held up the sleeve of the sweater Marcy was holding. "This color has been around a long time. Used to be called *hot pink.* It can carry a redhead, a blonde or a brunette. But frankly, I prefer it on redheads," she lowered her voice and winked. "On *you*, dear, it will be a real head turner, as if it were made for you," she insisted. Marcy stared at the woman and nodded. She imagined herself parading through the airport to meet Patty, husband and kids in tow, and every man's head turning to stare in wonder when she passed by like a queen. *A tofu-queen.* She suppressed a frantic giggle.

"I'll take it," Marcy breathed excitedly. She added several pairs of the dark pants and two more sweaters in green and white to throw into the bargain. *Ready or not, here I come.* Marcy beamed and made her way back to the car with her purchases clutched tightly at her side.

The next morning came in a buzz. Marcy forced the kids through a rushed breakfast and refused to explain to them one last time why they couldn't skip school to go to the airport with her. She then made a quick inspection of the house and Edward, who'd been sulking since he'd been returned from the groomer's the day before. When David left to escort the kids to the bus stop, she ran to the bedroom and pulled the fuchsia sweater from her closet. It glowed like a beacon in the morning light while she showered, gargled and perfumed. After spraying her hair into submission she dropped the sweater carefully over her head.

"Wow," she whispered at her reflection. Not only did she look ten pounds lighter, but the color seemed to bring out a light from within her self. A stronger light. Marcy blushed and swept into the den where David stood waiting before the television set, his hands buried stiffly into the pockets of his pressed trousers.

"Do you like?" Marcy gave him a wicked smile and spun around.

"You look great, *tofuti*," David murmured.

"Sure, real *chic*, right?" She stretched out her arms and gazed down at the sweater.

"Sure. Are we ready now?"

"What? Don't you like it?" Marcy's smile fell. David still stood with his hands in his pockets, his face solemn. She felt her shoulders slump within the soft fabric.

"Of course, it's great. Are *you* happy with it?"

Marcy remained silent, afraid suddenly to speak. A surge of tears had risen and pressed against something behind her eyes, threatening to break forth with her words. The clock chimed from its place on the wall between where they stood, breaking the silence.

"Ready?" David asked, this time touching her sleeve. Marcy nodded. He wrapped her coat firmly around her shoulders and hugged her for a moment before opening the door wide.

"It's show time," he commented with awkward cheer. *Show time*, Marcy echoed silently. She stepped out into the cool sunlight and waited while David locked the door behind them.

They drove in silence to the airport. Marcy was grateful for the chaotic hum of activity made by the strangers moving in bunches around them. Her underarms began to drip as she and David stood side by side, scanning the green arrivals screen.

"Here!" David called out, pulling her close and pointing.

"Do you see it?" Before he could answer, a loud, distant screech caused them to look down the long, colorfully crowded corridor that led to baggage claim. Marcy squinted, trying to sift through the crowd that moved around her like a wave of vertigo. Suddenly, she spotted them. An overweight woman in a fuchsia sweater was gesturing wildly and pulling an equally stout, bearded man along behind her. They wove their way unevenly through the crowd toward them.

"Marcy!" the woman yelled and waved, "Marcy!"

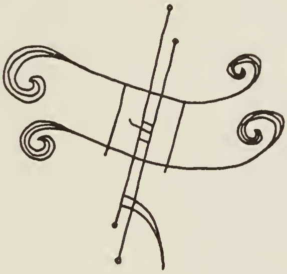
"Patty? *Don*?" Marcy blurted. She glanced back at David, who was also staring, a tiny smile on his lips. The woman had dropped the man's hand and was now running towards them. Her long black hair streamed behind her plentiful frame. Marcy looked up at David, her eyebrows raised.

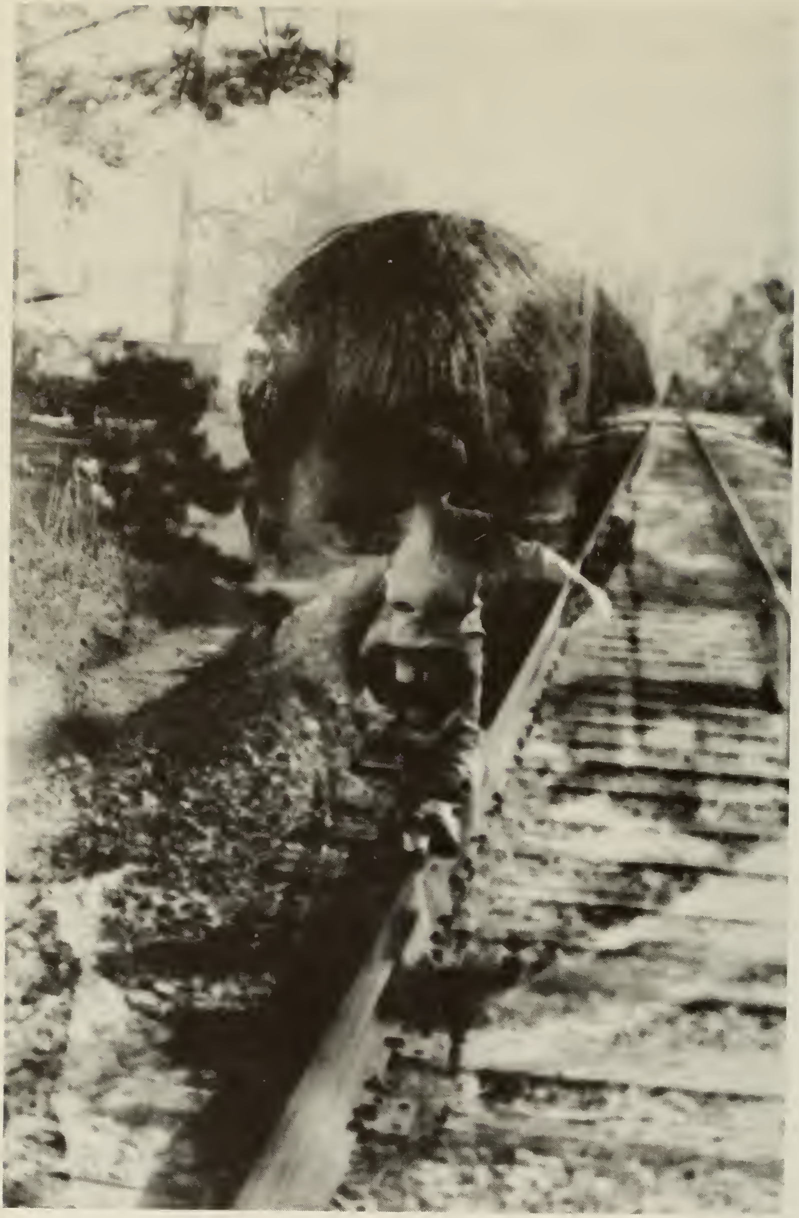
"Go on," he pressed gently at the small of her back. Marcy peered back at the approaching couple.

"Patty?" Marcy gasped, taking a small step forward, then pausing for a moment before racing to her sister and wrapping her arms around her. They stood hugging and laughing until the others reached them.

"Blood friends! Fellow peas, remember?" Patty laughed.

"Oh, sister!" Marcy held Patty's face in her hands. "Welcome, sister, *welcome*!"





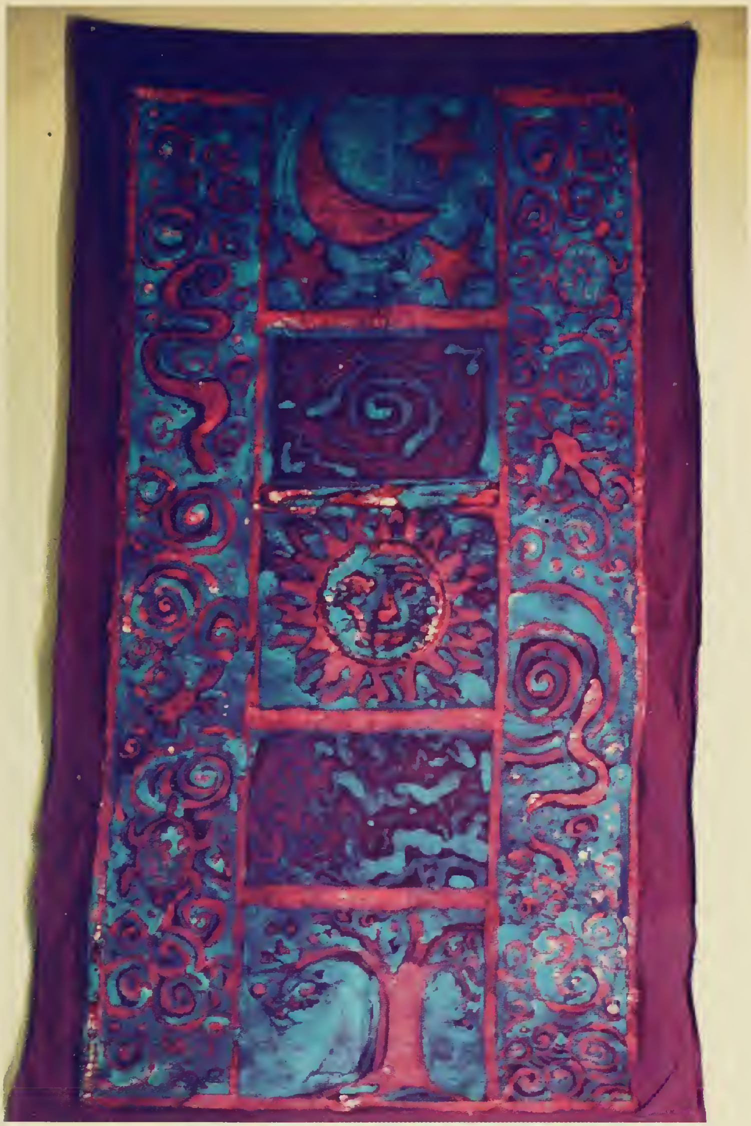
Cory on the Tracks
Des Purcell

The Calling:
A Personification in E Major

You are Learning; i am learning.
I know You, faceless, yearning as i yearn.
I know You by Your symbols and Your
presence in my life.
Love, boiling in my heart for You,
hurts and heals. I think of You when
i am down and grow more
depressed - or more confused - or elated.
My love for You is bigger
than i, and it scares and strengthens
my brave-weak heart.
I give all
to You, i take all from You,
i stand behind You, before You,
above You or below You,
sometimes all at once.
You are distant, yet sometimes within
my grasp. You hold me somehow
with incorporeal arms when i need
You, a beam of hope in my heart
where no hope had shone;
You are Love.
Sometimes i forget You, betray You,
lose who i am in the rush of loving You;
the details and doing.

Sometimes tears stream for joy
and sometimes for sorrow when i think of You,
Your successes or failures; both have i been,
and both will i yet be. I take more of You
into my heart every second;
with every word from book, teacher, student,
friend, foe, or stranger;
with every bird singing some vaguely
Mozartish tune before me or from the highway's
hum behind; with every dark tree against a starry
sky . . . even from myself sometimes.
I can take from You and give to You;
my calling is to share You.
You are Learning; i am learning.

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers



Sun and Moon Tree Batik
Dianna Ulm

Sleeping With a Mockingbird

Well after midnight
He comes--and she hears him
With his song that lulls her--
like a secret companion.
Lonely as she is--lonely love songs
He brings her.
Steadfast each evening--
Till morning he keeps her.
While at her side, lies a song
With less meaning--
The old purr of an old cat.
Alas greater comfort, she who has taken,
In one soulful voice;
The one real presence
In her solitude and darkness.
Even the crickets, in stillness
Have listened--
To a mockingbird's tales
of lost loves forgotten.
While at her side, her lover's silence
Shatters--Shatters her night song . . .

Donna Ferrence

A Sense of Family

Danielle Argenti

During the late winter of 1939, in a war torn Liverpool, England, a middle- aged couple prepared for bed. The wife, a staunch Catholic, modestly buttoned her nightgown as her husband, aching from a hard day's work, relaxed his stiff joints and muscles under the warm covers. The woman, Marie (pronounced with a British accent, "Mary"), threw a sheet over the mirror to cover it and completed her nightly routine. With the closet doors opened and all the dresser drawers closed, she then climbed into her side of the bed. The wind howled eerily outside and caused the sixty year old house, severely battered by Luftwaffe bombing runs, to creak like her husband's prematurely aging bones.

Marie pulled the covers up and tucked herself in as best she could, as she did every night, then tried to calm her nerves. The war had ravaged poor old England and had taken all the young men away, most never to return--like her brother Michael. *It was God's grace that kept Henry out of it,* she thought to herself and of what life would have been like without him home. Her all alone with eleven children while trying to exist on rations would have been intolerable. Her husband's snoring interrupted her thoughts. *"Henry,"* she whispered at first, then "*Henry*!" again at a shrill. He moaned as she elbowed his ribs, "*For God's sake, you'll wake the dead.*" He growled something bitter about women then rolled over and immediately fell back asleep. His short, thick, bristly hair crackled against the crisp cotton sheets as he settled back into the pillow. She rolled to face Henry's sheltering back and move away from the mirror which still spooked her, even with it covered.

When Marie was young she had seen a ghost in that mirror. She saw the image of a little girl about eight years old, washing her hands in the bowl next to her bed. The specter seemed to be smiling and happy, though the experience still frightened Marie into a frozen terror. She tried to put the mirror and the memories of her mother's old farm house out of her mind. Marie needed sleep. Tomorrow she had a load of mending to deliver so that she could collect her pittance. The meager amount she earned would help them survive until Henry's next payday. The children would be up at dawn, without fail. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any air raids tonight. After all, what could fly in this gale? She could not imagine any reason for her not to get a much needed eight hours' sleep tonight. Even the children were well, thank God, despite the raw, early spring weather. It took hours for her to unwind. Finally, she fell asleep, though a broken slumber by the occasional need to nudge Henry into silence. The wind blew harder still, hard enough to move the black-out curtains that hung at each window, which were made drafty by the almost constant shelling. She closed her eyes to the malevolent night and prayed silently for one good night's sleep--something of a luxury since the fighting began.

Marie drifted off. She dreamt of her mother's modest farm, of the animals and of the big old house, of carefree days and of her nine siblings, of Michael, once so young and full of life.

Then the scene abruptly changed. She saw May, the youngest of the family, as she was at present with her three boys in that miserable home near the docks with that wretch of a husband. May was nearly starved because there wasn't any food left in the house. Selfishly, her husband had sold the family's rations to buy ale at the corner pub. Her breasts could no longer produce enough milk to keep her six-month-old from hunger; she'd lost too much weight and recently developed a fever. The food that did come in she gave to her six-year-old, Paul, and to her four year old, Joseph. Despite the hardship, her husband was healthy enough existing on his liquid diet. May had tried to kick the louse out several times, only to be beaten until she apologized.

Marie groaned in her sleep. She watched the dream scape now centered in May's barren kitchen. Marie felt as though she were floating on May's ceiling, watching without being able to participate, completely powerless and frustrated. May was sitting with her youngest at her empty breast; at her feet stood an old suitcase. Her other two sons sat bleary-eyed on the sofa in the next room. It was after midnight. Marie sensed that May was feeding the child one more time before venturing out on a wickedly cold night. The baby tired at her breast, unable to be completely satisfied, and drifted off. She placed the baby on the table and began to wrap him in a thick blanket. May rushed as she heard her drunken husband stumble through the door. He staggered in hours earlier than usual. He was bloodied from a bar fight and was in his usual angered delirium.

He growled, "*Just where do you think you're off to?*"

May ignored him and continued to wrap the infant. *It is useless to try and reason with him,* she thought to herself, *you'd get further with a brick wall. "Paul, get your coat on and dress your brother,"* she yelled from the kitchen.

Her husband lurched at her and shouted, "*You can go, but you'll not take my boys!*" She backed away from the table knowing he'd injure the baby in his drunken rage if he came after her.

Paul walked in with Joseph; "*Mum, you'll have to button his coat, I don't know how.*" Paul was afraid to enter the kitchen hearing his father's voice, but knew that sometimes Daddy would stop hitting Mummy when he walked in.

May bent to close little Joey's tight wool coat and her husband yanked her hair. As he began to swing wildly at her, she screamed, telling Paul to get the babies out of the room. Her husband missed most of the times he swung at her, though when he finally made contact, he left her slumped on the floor bleeding.

"May!" Marie shrieked from her sleep, soaked in sweat. Henry rolled over toward his wife and shook her. *"It's just a dream, Marie, easy now, just a dream."* He hushed her and she drifted back into her dream state. Marie could see May walking through a field covered in a foot of snow, in the midst of a fierce blizzard. She had the baby wrapped up and buttoned under her coat. Little Paul was dragging the toddler by the arm through snow that half buried Joey's small body. May had the old suitcase of her few possessions in her other hand, essentials for the baby and clothes for the boys. They walked for miles against the angry wind, falling often from exhaustion brought on by cold and malnutrition. The sky turned from black to a cruel gray as dawn's earliest lights began to illuminate the merciless storm. The toddler couldn't walk any further so May carried him, too, on her back for as long as she could. Finally, she stumbled and looked as though close to death.

Marie opened her eyes and sat up. The dream was so real that she wept. Henry woke and sat up next to her, rubbing his bristly chin and whispering, *"What is it*?" Quietly, she cried on his broad shoulder until she could bring herself to tell him of her terrible nightmare. After doing so, she felt as though a weight had been lifted. He gave her a squeeze and a peck on the cheek and offered to go make her a cup of tea. She nodded and wiped her face as he left their bedroom.

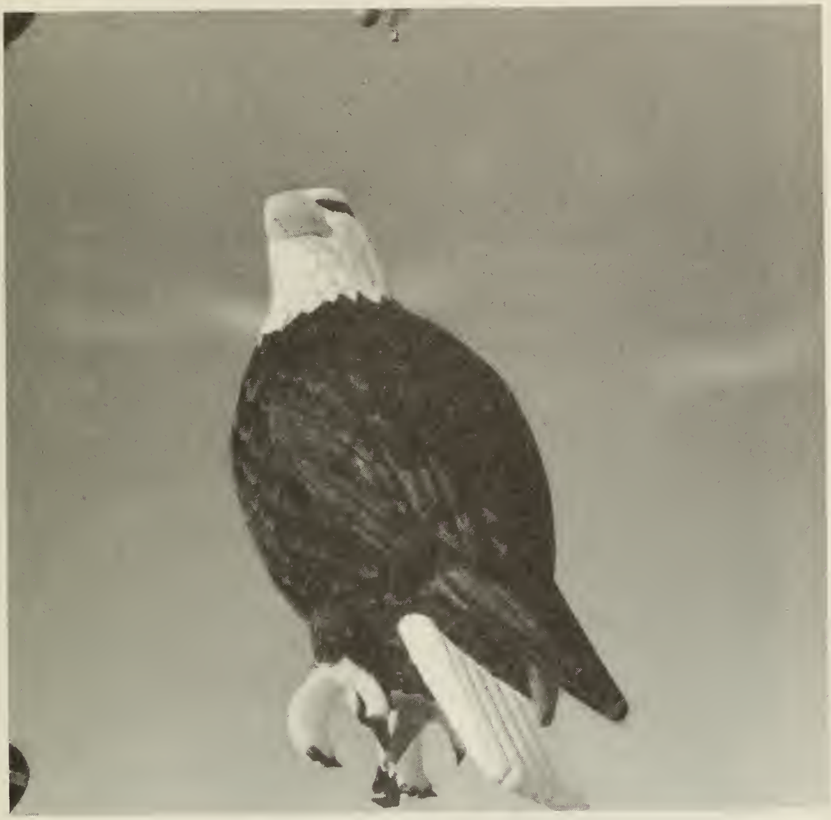
Thank God for Henry, she thought to herself. A hard man sometimes, but good to her and the children. His dry cynical wit and playing the piano could make the war and the hardship all but disappear, if only for a little while. It's a miracle that he didn't go off to war, she recalled. He'd gone to sign up and they wouldn't take him. His ear had started to bleed just ten minutes before he got there--*it bled like the dickens*--then it stopped shortly after he got home. It hadn't happened before or since--*a miracle, I say.*

Henry worked in the kitchen brewing a particularly large pot of tea. He hadn't pushed back the black-out curtains yet, but he knew the weather called for an extra cup.

While he was about to start up the stairs with their breakfast teas, he heard something he was sure was just wind at the front door. Still, he decided to check. He put the tray down on the piano and opened the door.

May fell in. Henry caught her before she and the infant hit the floor. Tough little Paulie stood at the door holding baby brother Joey's matted hand. May was burning with fever and weeping as Paulie told Uncle Henry of their harrowing night. Though, the boy needn't have bothered. Aunt Marie had already told him.

Momma's Passion
Vickie Williams



Eagle
Robert Bell

Autobiography

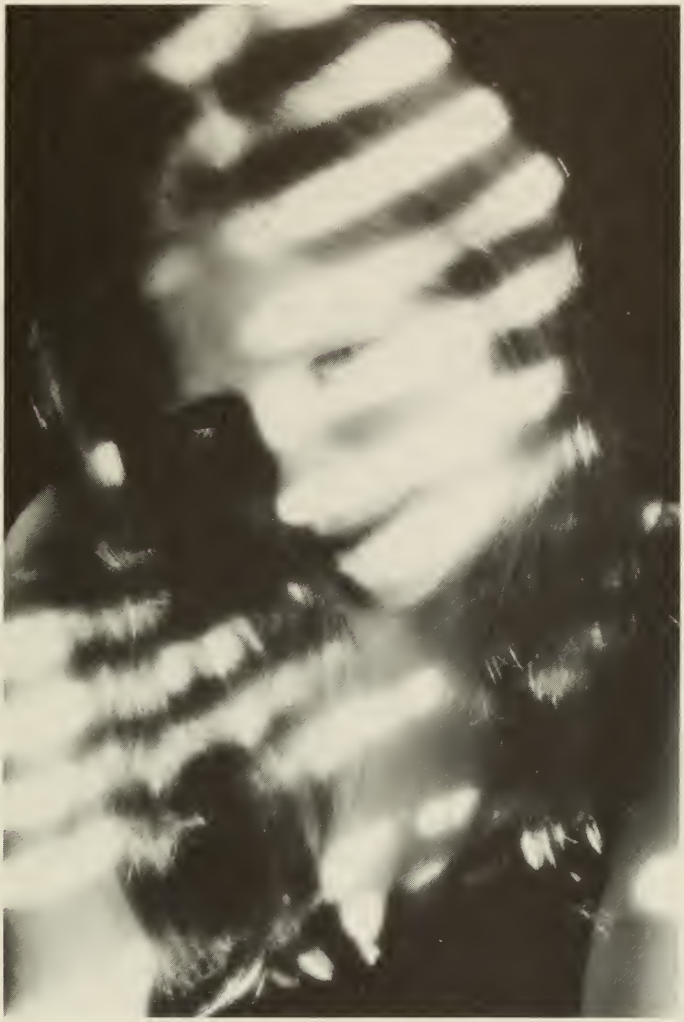
I shan't wear my humanity today
This dead magic reality I will not stay
Upon this imprisoning man skin
I rip, tear, slice, and peel
My true self I do unconceal.

As two horns, piercing my head, sprout
I praise my Creator with a joyful shout
From my back two wings of the Pit unfold
Cloven goat's hooves shattering my feet
With manticore's tail my transformation be 'plete.

Nightmare and monster exult I
And in this computer world demons never die
A tomb is my bed and a skull my pillow
Shielding me from the burning, blasting sun
This eye of gods I despise and shun.

By the light of Mother Moon I sing and dance
With the dead and damned a merry prance
Darkness and mystery my eternal lot
Humans! What do I care for thee?
Reveling in my cursed, joyous deviltry.

Michael Williams



Marianne II
Setona Page

Deities' Debate

I. So Sayeth the Demon

Embrace the darkness,
for it hides your tears.
Flee the light
that illuminates fears.

Hold close the shadows,
for no secrets do they hold.
They touch and caress,
and never do they scold.

Turn out the sunshine
that reflects all truth.

Shy from its beams
that chase away youth.

Kneel with your brothers,
smiling at precious death,
taking communion
from dark and warming breath.

Not even He,
in all immaculate wealth,
can abate your fears
or save you from yourself.

II. God's Answer

I am the beacon
that leads to Life Eternal.
I am the builder
Of Satan's grand inferno.

I make no broken promises
For my sheep to hold dear,
But make your choices wisely,
For Judgment Day is near.

Choose a world of darkness
Where each corner holds true pain,
Or turn to light and purity
Where Eternity is to gain.

Embrace the darkness, and flee the light —
I cannot save you there.
But kiss the sunshine, and join the fight —
Eternal love we'll share.

Never can the Prince of Darkness,
With his poison tongue,
Offer more than sin to you
In his heap of dung.

Embrace my darkness
for it hides your tears.
Flee His light
that illuminates fears.

Judgment Day is coming.
Are you lamb or
Bohemian?
Life Eternal is yours and
mine.
So sayeth the demon.

I am your beacon,
Your path to Life Eternal.
I alone can save you
From Satan's grand inferno.

Judgment Day is coming.

Are you Bohemian or Lamb?

Do you seek the path of light?
That is what I am.

Billy Parker

Forever

Mary O'Sako

“Now, Precious. You must be still,” Gregor warned absently.

Precious nodded and looked out across the lake from where she and Gregor sat hunched at the base of an ancient oak tree, shielded by a round of gardenia bushes. A ripe moon was just beginning to scale the murky landscape, and its reflection spread like the long, white bones of a hand across the water towards where they squatted. Precious jiggled her thin legs beneath her skirt, now and then plucking at a gardenia blossom and casting its pale petals out onto the water where they floated as weightless as time.

Gregor leered at her with a patronizing grin before settling his back against the mossy surface of the tree.

“You’ll scare 'em all away with all those sounds you’re making. Then what? We’ll have to sit here most of the night with nothing to do. You know very well what a flagrant *waste* the wasting of time is. We may even be forced into turning in empty at the end, and you know how painful *that* can be!”

Precious shrugged and fiddled with a fresh sprig of flowers. She tore away a fragrant blossom and buried her face in it, then chewed thoughtfully on a petal as she stared up at the stars through curtains of Spanish moss. Across the pond the moon hung in full view, having reached a point above the tallest of the elms and maples, turning them into heaping mounds of silver. *It’s perfect, of course.* It always is. She sighed to no one.

“Can you remember back, Gregor, to the last time we came here?”

“Please, keep the din to a minimum, Precious, your voice can carry," he scolded in a deep whisper.

"I *am.*" She threw him a sharp look and scooted farther out onto the cool grass to snatch up a fat earthworm, twirling it around a time-yellowed fingernail before tossing it off into the water where it landed with a perfunctory smack. Gregor shook his head in response to the smattering of bullfrogs that followed.

"Gregor? It's okay to *whisper*, isn't it? You used to whisper plenty to me. Tell me if you remember. It's important, to me anyhow. Do you remember?"

"Why *do* you ask such nonsensical questions, Precious? Why is it so important to you?"

"Not nonsensical. I can remember. I *do*. I can remember a time when we were more. . . I don't know, filled with each other, I suppose." Precious sighed wistfully and slid back towards Gregor's emaciated form, where she could see his profile cut into the darkness. A profile once so very elegant, with high forehead and creamy skin, it was now hawk-like and sallow; and when he looked at her, it was with green eyes that had faded to a watery gray. Precious smiled sadly and toyed with the grimy collar of his coat until he pushed her hand gently away.

"I *do* repulse you! I knew it. You said we'd love forever, no matter what. You once even said you'd kiss my wrinkles when I got them." She folded her arms tightly.

"Precious, what am I to do? You always start out like this, so restless. Can we not enjoy the evening in peace? Why must I constantly remind you of how things are and will be, while you dredge up things that are no more? Be patient and be still, you know you *must* keep still if you are to come with me. You know how important this is," he finished solemnly. His features softened at her pouty countenance, "Come now, Precious, it won't be much longer now. I know how deep the restlessness lies, believe me. But the full moon always brings them, we *both* just have to be patient." He patted her knee roughly and looked back out at the water. Precious gave him a small perfunctory smile and folded her hands loosely in her lap.

A couple emerged from the shadow of trees across the lake and strolled slowly along the path that led around its circumference. They stopped suddenly and the man pulled his companion closer until their faces met and became one in the half-light. Precious raised her fingers to her own parched lips and watched them closely until they finally parted and turned away to walk off across the field, hand in hand. She leaned heavily against Gregor.

"Gregor?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you miss it?"

"Miss *what*?" he sighed, suppressing a grimace.

"Don't you miss those deep kisses we used to share? So lovely, like what *they* were just doing," she nodded towards the path the couple had taken.

"What? We aren't like them anymore."

"You know what I mean. The way we used to kiss made me feel. . ."

"What?"

"Pretty! It made me feel *pretty*," she finished, brushing away an insect that was feeling its way up the length of her sleeve.

"Pretty?"

"Oh, never mind, you old ogre!" Precious crawled a short distance away. She tugged at the front of her skirt and a large piece of the hem gave way and fluttered to the ground. She picked up the mildewed fragment and held it in front of her. *Pink, I can remember pink.* She closed her eyes tightly and pulled from the dank recesses of her memory the essence of an evening. *A long ago evening like this one, the night was fresh, it was early June. Oh and the dress, my beautiful pink dress, it fit so well. . .and Gregor, how his eyes did light in his face when he saw me move across the lawn towards him. And I was, yes, I was pretty. . .*

The faint crunching sound of approaching footsteps drifted easily to them through the still air. Gregor leaned forward, Precious tensed. It was a young man, hands in pockets, whistling a vaguely familiar tune. *Please go away, not yet, not yet. I'm not ready to leave yet. Don't let him near here, leave us alone a little longer, please.* Precious counted her breaths silently. *One, two, three, four.* The young man reached the park bench a mere hundred yards from where they sat. He turned there, where the path forked, and headed up the slope towards the parking area.

Four, he left on the count of four, a good solid number, a good omen. But that song he was whistling, I know a song like that, I know it. . .what was it, oh something, something wonderful! Precious propped her chin in her hand and shut her eyes once more.

A phantom orchestra played to her with haunting familiarity, softly titillating with its repetition of the piece until her mind retrieved firmly the words that went with it. *"Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak; I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek. .."*

It was Gregor and she, dancing in the Blue Pelican Ball Room, where they waltzed and did the *Charleston* for hours on end. That had been so very long ago, but it came to her like it was yesterday. Gregor had been so debonair in his tuxedo with his dark hair brushed back and his eyes green and blazing. She'd felt as light as a rose petal moving within his iron embrace, and her long pink skirt had swished delightfully around her ankles. So completely and utterly happy they'd felt that night, so filled with each other that they had vowed to live in each other's sight forever.

"Forever." Precious savored the word as it tumbled from her lips and dissolved into the atmosphere. She opened her eyes to the quiet pressure of bone-hard fingers on her shoulder.

"Precious?"

"Hmmmm."

"Precious, what are you doing?"

"Oh, Gregor. I was just thinking backwards."

"Thinking backwards?"

"Reminiscing. About how we'd danced all night long at the *Blue Pelican Ball Room*? Oh, to *be* like *that* again, to feel like *that*!"

"You mean you were *dreaming*? Now?" his voice flattened.

Precious nodded and returned hesitantly to his side where she lay her head on his shoulder. Gregor stiffened. A dog barked from some distant back yard and was immediately silenced by the incoherent command of its master.

"You were supremely handsome in your black suit. It made your eyes look so green, you know, like deep emerald pools."

"Please. Don't do this, Precious. The time, don't forget the time."

"No, I haven't. But you have," she commented softly. She reached with a trembling hand and touched his cheek before sitting up and facing away from him. A bat's erratic flight caught their attention as it squeaked above their heads. It dove and ricocheted from tree to tree as if seeking escape from its self-induced flight plan.

"Deep emerald pools, eh?"

"Oh, certainly, love." She stretched and threw him a smoldering look. "Why else do you think I've stayed *here* at your side for so long, my *ogre*?"

They looked at each other and laughed. It was a rusty sound, like the opening of a long abandoned gate. Afterwards they sat in silence for long while, aware of the distant drone of traffic from the new freeway, and the occasional buzz of mosquitoes as they passed by, searching for warm flesh to feed upon.

The loud slam of a car door accompanied by the happy shout of a child from across the entranceway to the park caused both Gregor and Precious to blink.

"Do you ever think we may have had *that*, Gregor? Before, you know?"

"Had what?"

"You mean to say you never saw us with a child, a family?"

"Precious, I saw only our lives! You are my family, and there was only *one* choice for us and you know this. We *could* have been sedentary and mundane, resting our brittle bones on some pastel lawn furniture in a place like Boca Raton with the rest of the decaying, sipping watered drinks and chasing them with medicines for this and that, and all the time wondering where our lives went. Our short, little lives. I mean, why rehash all of this *now*, all this melancholy *rot* on *this*, our sole night out of the year?" His voice cut deeply through the warm air like the cool blade of a razor.

Precious bowed her head. A small sob escaped her. She touched the back of one gnarled hand to her eye; it came back dry. She allowed the song to creep back into her conscious. She felt the words form in her throat, and her vocal chords, long rusted from disuse, picked them up. "Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so. . ." the words become lost in the dry weeping that choked her. She stopped and covered her face with both hands.

Gregor moved close and placed an arm around her shoulders and for awhile Precious' dwindling cries were echoed only by the crickets. She squeezed Gregor's hand as she fought silently for control.

Footsteps were borne once again from across the lake. Gregor released Precious' hand slowly and leaned forward to wait. Closer they came. Another couple, a young man and woman, strolled into the light. *Pink, she's wearing pink.* Precious felt the ache in her dissolve into something hard as she watched them. They did not take the turn. On they came, arm in arm, speaking in the gentle, considerate tones of those young to each other. When they neared the oak tree, Gregor gave the nod.

The couple neither saw nor heard what came at them from the bushes beside the lake. They were taken in the most tender of moments as they gazed into each other's eyes, without a single thought or reflex of fear. Gregor took the woman, Precious the man. They drug their prey through the bushes and into a secluded clearing, where they deftly peeled the clothing from the carcasses and lay these items carefully aside before falling to their feed. Wet, cracking sounds pervaded the night.

Precious, always the first to finish, stood and waited for Gregor. "Come here," she commanded softly from the renewed lush of her lips. Gregor stepped across the deep stain on the grass that the elements would soon wear away and stooped, smiling indulgently while he allowed her to wipe his face clean and brush the black hair from his now smooth forehead. They undressed and shredded what was left of their moldering garments, scattering the fistful of scraps into the wind before donning the fresher attire. Precious and Gregor faced each other, resplendent in the garb of the already forgotten.

"Dance, my sweet?" Gregor murmured, bowing low beneath a moon that was taking its last turn in the sky to begin its journey west. Precious nodded and curtsied before stepping within the circle of his arms, where she savored the strength and fluidity in their movements. *Pink, I just knew it'd be Pink*, she thought happily as the girl's skirt moved with her.

They danced around the field, first in a *waltz* and then a *fox-trot*. Precious gazed into Gregor's deep green eyes and forgot all else. There was no hunger, nor illness, nor death. *Forever and ever and ever.* She closed her eyes and held onto him, allowing him to lead her through graceful swirls and dips over the night-cooled grass. They moved so swiftly that they became a blur no mortal eye could comprehend, a cool breeze on the dead calm of a late summer night.

Gregor and Precious danced until the pink edge of dawn slit the horizon. Precious froze and stared into it, until Gregor gently pried her fingers from his shoulder and led her back toward the lake. A tear trickled down her cheek and she caught it with her hand and held it aloft. It shimmered like a diamond from her finger before dripping onto her waiting tongue. *A single tear, a single drop of salt for our anniversary.*

She trailed slowly after Gregor, pausing when a shiny pink something caught her eye. The girl's pocket book still lay in the damp grass. Precious stooped and picked it up, savoring the smoothness of the leather before opening it. Inside she found a wallet, a hairbrush and a small silver tube. She plucked the tube from the purse and let the rest fall forgotten to the ground. Twisting the tube slowly, a small, pink stick of lip color appeared.

"Pink," she sighed, closing the tube carefully and holding it to her bosom. She moved across the grass to where Gregor waited, his eyes glinting with the flame of emeralds. He embraced her and they headed out through the park and across the still sleeping town common until they came to a gravel road that led through tall iron gates. They entered and walked up the path that cut through the center of the cemetery, to the ivy covered, stone building that waited for them there. The damp, moldy smell of the crypt that lay within greeted them as they stood poised to cross the threshold and into the perpetual dark. Precious gripped his arm.

"Once more, Gregor?"

He nodded slowly. Precious squeezed his hand between hers and stared defiantly into the ever reddening sky.

"*Now*, Gregor. Kiss me *now*."

"We can't, Precious."

"Please, just this once?" she breathed, pressing herself closer.

He glanced up at the swelling clouds of the coming day before stooping forward and kissing her, pushing his lips deeply into hers, abruptly shoving her away as the hunger swelled in them. Precious smiled sadly and touched her lips.

"Forever?"

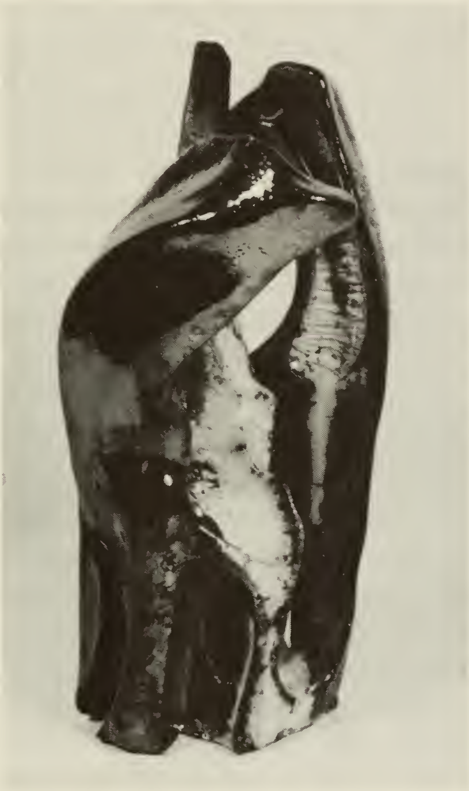
"Forever." He smiled back and held out his hand, "come, Precious." He led her inside, sealing the doors against the daylight behind them.

These Four Walls

Solitaire. Bare. Silent.
Nothing but an occasional dark, gray scruff
On the creamy white walls and me.
They will cover them with fresh new paint.
They will fill the holes that were used to hang
My mirrors, curtains, and frames.
They will make it look as if nobody
Lived here.
Brand new.
If these four walls could speak
What would they say?
Would they laugh at the way I acted out
My dreams and fantasies?
Would they tell of the lonely, insecure girl
Who stared out the window
Wishing someone would love her
Enough to rescue her?
Would they speak of the time
I blindly invited poisonous love inside?
Inside the room of my soul
That was one time alive?
Would they say how many nights
I wept on my knees, on the chilled wooden floor?
Would they tell about how I stood
In front of the long, narrow mirror
To criticize my physical flaws?

These four walls have witnessed
Bits and pieces of my being.
They have seen and heard
The depths of the darkest, profound secrets.
Are they eager for the next one
To occupy the space, to take my place?
Exactly how many coats of fresh paint
Have they endured, anyways?
I will never know.
If these four walls could speak
What would they say?

Michelle Ortiz



Mating
Christopher K. Daly

Trash: A Lesson in Seduction

Billy Parker

The grey-tarnished truck lumbered through street after street, picking up the world’s refuse at a glance. But was that all the streets held? Mere refuse? Darwin didn’t think so. The day he applied for his job as a garbage man, he went to the office, or the cubicle that poorly imitated one, what with the water cooler and all, and immediately met the secretary who asked if he was there for the job of sanitary engineer. Darwin hated glamour. He saw his job for its reality, garbage collector. Still, he said yes and recited his vital statistics as if in the Army. Darwin, Peter G. 5’11'. 163 pounds. Social Security, 254-64-2665. Truck license, same. That concluded his interview. Hired. Garbage man. Usually, the city placed two men to a truck, but Darwin was stuck alone. His partner was down with the flu or some such ailment. He wouldn’t be back for at least two weeks, and with the personnel shortage, there were no extra partners to be had. Just as well. Darwin preferred working alone. He could get closer to his work. Salvaging the broken treasures of others brought him great joy. Occasionally, he learned about his customers, as he liked to call them. Little Rusty got a bad report from school, but his mom never knew. Mr. Danfield got lingerie catalogs in the mail. Dirty old bastard. Darwin’s salvaging was how he came to love Marissa. She was unknowingly the love of Darwin’s life.

The cans yielded more than the usual wonders on that particular day. Darwin lifted a lid to reveal a letter. He smelled the fine perfume, even over the pungent stench of garbage. He opened the sealed pink envelope, careful not to damage its contents. Coaxing the paper from its resting place, he read.

> My love, I have been watching you. Your walk, with its side-to-side sway, your hair blowing in the morning

> breeze, your sleepy yawn as you pass my house every day. I love to see your muscles, perfect working machines, flexing, dripping with the dew of your daily toiling. I have fallen in love with you, my dear. You make my heart flutter. I love you and will always be—
> Yours, Marissa

Darwin was stunned. Could it really be him she was after? Or was she too scared to give her letter to its intended recipient? He carefully replaced the letter as he walked back to the truck. Was he Marissa's lover? And if he was, which house was hers? It could be any one of four. If only he knew.

After a long night of thinking, Darwin woke to a rainy day and prepared himself for work. A quick breakfast, and he was out the door. As Darwin drove his route, he daydreamed of ways he could see his beloved Marissa, but no idea seemed worthwhile. Presently, though, he was in front of her cans. Darwin again wondered which of the houses was hers. Was she watching him now? He glanced at each house, ready to look away if he saw anyone looking back. There was not, so Darwin raided the cans. Finding another note, he dumped the rest and got into the truck. Again he coaxed the words of adoration from within the walls of the envelope.

> My dear, I have learned your name. Peter. It is such a wonderful name. How I should love to call it out again and again. I am going to my mother's today, and I will not see you, but write me a response. Leave it under the can. I so look forward to your words, Peter.
> Yours, Marissa

Darwin was ecstatic. It really was him she loved. The rest of the day, Darwin thought and thought. Finally, he decided to do the first drastic act in his life. He took up a pen and began writing.

> Marissa, though I haven't seen you, I am in love with

you. I dream about you at night. I wonder what you look like. I look forward to your perfumed, pink envelope. I slowly open it and drink in every word. I must see you, Marissa. I have to see the woman who makes me feel this way. Tell me which house is yours. I will come to see you, and we can be together. I hope to see you soon, Marissa.
Peter

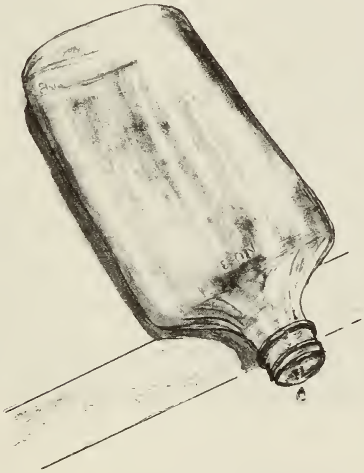
As soon as Darwin finished his letter, he drove over and left it exactly where Marissa had instructed, under the can. Driving home, he thought about what morning would bring. For the first time in years, Darwin anticipated the next day. With dawn came invigoration and courage. Darwin got ready and rushed out to work. He didn't even bother with the treasures of others. Today he wanted a treasure of his own. When he came to the can, he could scarcely open it. Finding the prettier-than-usual pink envelope, he shakily removed the message.

Peter, My house is the red brick. Come tonight to the back door. Knock three times. I'll be waiting.
Love, Marissa

Darwin jumped about as he returned to the truck, almost forgetting to empty the can. After rushing home from work, Darwin immediately began to get ready for his evening. He took his time to make sure everything was exactly right. First, a shower. Just enough hot water to feel good. Darwin never was one for too much hot water. Next, after carefully drying his wet limbs, Darwin shaved. He expertly agitated the brush to form a pearly white foam. Closing his eyes, he lathered his face, knowing every inch by feel. His skin tingled as the thick foam penetrated his pores. Darwin slowly picked up his father's gift to him sixteen years ago — a silver handled razor. He palmed it as if he were shaking an old friend's hand. The newly sharpened blade felt ever so good as it removed the stubble from Darwin's right cheek. Right was always first. Then left. Finally, the chin. Last, the upper lip. Darwin carefully rinsed the tool in the running water. Then he blotted his clean shaven face. He enjoyed the smoothness. He hoped Marissa would as well. An hour later, Darwin was at Marissa's doorstep. He rapped three times. Knock. Knock. Knock. Marissa opened the door. She was stunning, with her fitted dress and six inch heels. Darwin could but stare as she sashayed through the dim light toward him. Saying nothing, she pulled him inside, meeting him with a kiss that almost stopped his heart. Marissa smiled as she led him to the bedroom.

The next morning, Darwin awoke with the strength only a night like the last could bring, to find a pink envelope on the pillow. He read.

> Be gone by noon. My husband returns at one. I can never see you again. It's amazing what treasures one finds in the trash, isn't it, Peter?

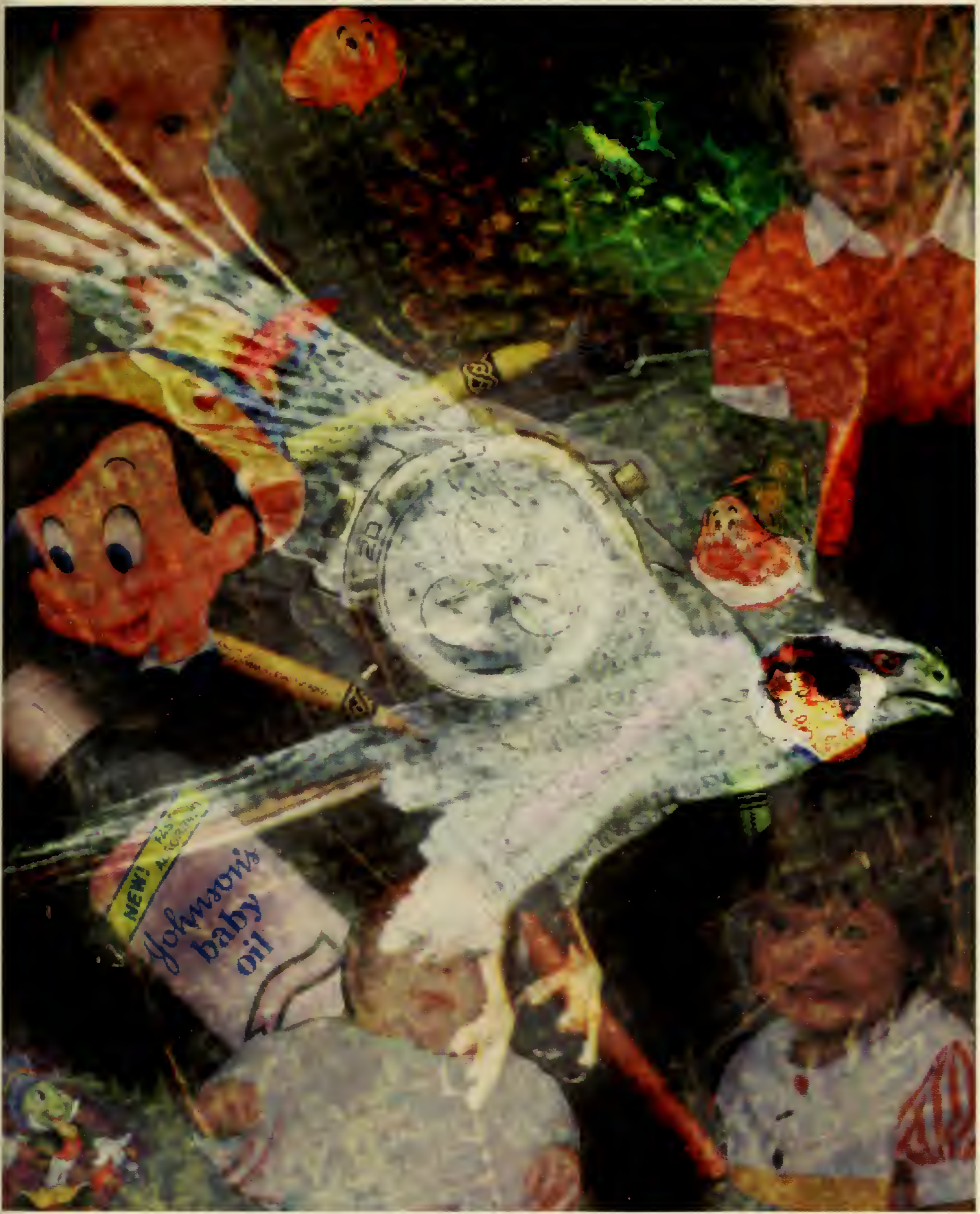


Loneliness
Nick Bacich

National Geographic

I snip outline of bright objects.
The artist in me selects, places.
Viewer will put it all together.
The colorful clutter collects.
Shadow covers sloping mountains.
Rusty tractor remains behind.
Young boy with flowers is snubbed.
The girl has lips pursed tight.
Old man's skin is weather beaten,
He smiles beside black, Model-T.
Robed priest blesses scene of viewer
She faces wall of oil paintings.
Thin child peers beneath a basket.
He stands before fortress and blue whale.
The boy jumps over banister.
Parents watch, see skate board in his hand.
Grandmother squinches girl's pink cheeks.
She squeezes child in crook of her arm.
Behind them is large broken egg shell.
The chicken's foot is large and splayed.

Rachel Brown


NEW!
Johnson's
baby
oil

Time Flying
Phillip Kandel

The Spring

Julie Barfield

Did you know that if aphids had no predators and an unlimited food supply, they would cover the earth, several miles thick in just one summer? It's an interesting fact I picked up from, but no, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start from the beginning.

There's a table in my garden, a green, wrought-iron table with surprisingly comfortable chairs to match. I got it for a song at an estate sale last winter.

That table started everything. Before I had it, I lived inside. I'd look out at the same shrubs around the house, legacies of a former owner, and I'd turn back to the television or the dishes or whatever was waiting for me indoors.

But after I bought it, things started to happen. I decided I'd enjoy sitting at it more if I had a little privacy from the bordering road; up went the wooden fence. I thought some vines might be nicer to look at than a fence, so in came the Honeysuckle. Roses followed, then Dahlias, Larkspur, Delphinium, Columbines, Sweet William, Summer Phlox, and a virtual stampede of garden plants, tools, soil, and planters.

It was a pretty extensive garden, especially for someone with no experience beyond a patch of Shasta daisies and Marigolds in childhood, but I loved it. When I had a spare hour, it was spent preparing the soil, weeding, planning, planting, watering, pruning. Nothing could stop me; I had found a purpose.

From then on, I kept my curtains open whenever I was inside. I filled the house with vases of cut flowers, and every heavy book was a flower press. The outdoors had become familiar and inviting to me. I savored the cool softness of rich soil crumbling in my hands, the gentle, ariry fragrances of flowers and of leaves--nothing like potpourri--and the cheerful banter of bird calls floating through the air.

My garden had begun beautifully. The plants were thriving, budding, blossoming, rewarding me for my devotion, thrilling me with their variety and brilliance. I spent whole days at my table, watching the transformations and contemplating the richness of my paradise.

Then one day, having noticed an odd color on one of the English Roses, I stepped over to take a closer look. The heavy round bud, normally an even, buttery yellow, was splotched with red marks and black circles. I was appalled. Looking into the garden, I saw an abundance of healthy plants, but here and there, in inconspicuous spots, there were frayed leaves, nibbled petals, inexplicable movements. I couldn't tell how many or what kind they were, but I knew my fragile garden was surrounded by--bugs.

I went to the toolshed for my clippers and used them to lop off all the infested flowers I could find. Another Rose, a Peony bud, even the leaves of a Butterfly Bush. I squashed them all thoroughly, as much for effect as to kill the eggs inside.

In the weeks that followed, there were more and more bug-related problems. The one "useful" plant I had tried, a simple tomato, had been attacked and all its fruit consumed or ruined. The Irises got borers; aphids came out of nowhere to feast on the best of my Roses; caterpillars were everywhere. I was desperate.

I resolved to buy a poison and douse the whole yard with it. I went to the store, headed toward the aisle I had always avoided, took a deep breath, and plunged in. "Harmful to fish and wildlife," "May be harmful to birds, fish, and other wildlife," "Toxic to fish, waterfowl, and other wildlife," all the containers proclaimed. The air I was trying not to breathe on that aisle backed up their claims. I left the store empty-handed, resigned.

For days after that, I sat at my table and stared into the garden, watching the gruesome little creatures devour my joy as they crawled, hopped, and flew through the paradise that used to be mine. Horror followed resignation, and I began to shudder at their stiff-jointed acrobatics and their fluid dances, watching frozen as their tiny relentless mouths clamped tight to the flowers, drinking the life that had enriched mine. The disproportionately large eyes peered out at me in dreams, and the light, stiff legs crawled over me as I lay inert, sleeping. Tiny winged things started flying into my mouth, and when I awoke, I spent half an hour brushing my teeth.

Over the sound of running water and my frantic gargling, I heard one morning on the radio that the county extension service was offering a class in organic pest control. I called immediately to register and counted the days till it started. The dreams got worse, as though the little monsters knew my plan and were taking their vengeance early. But they couldn't scare me out of it; that Tuesday afternoon, the first day of class, I was there early, waiting by the door, anxious to begin.

"Here for the bug class?" asked a voice over my shoulder.

"Yes," I said, turning to see who spoke. It was a man, standing comfortably beside me, holding a notebook under one arm and smiling pleasantly.

"I guess we're a little early. I'm Karl Blake." He held out his hand.

I took it and answered, "Charlotte."

"Just Charlotte?" he asked, but before I had time to answer, the instructor appeared and began to jabber at us. He unlocked the door to the classroom and let us in. More students followed, and in a few moments we were all assembled at a large table in the middle of the room.

The instructor called the roll. Eight people of the nine who had registered were present. He decided to begin. First, he had us tell how long we had been gardening. I was one of the newest at it, not surprisingly, but no one seemed to mind. Then he asked about specific crops or flowers and our individual problems with bugs. I told my story, all but the nightmares. Every time I looked up, it seemed Karl was looking over at me. I don't mean rudely, just attentively, almost like, well, attentively.

About ten minutes into class, the door opened. We all looked around and saw a huge pair of eyes blinking back.

"Is this the organic gardening class?" It was a thin, reedy voice, for all the world like a cricket. The instructor didn't seem to notice. He invited her in.

"Livia Olson?" he asked, looking at his roll.

"Liv," she replied and slid into the empty chair at the end.

The class was two hours long, with a ten minute break in the middle. As the break began and the group was scattering in search of vending machines and bathrooms, I heard that odd high voice behind me, spoken in my direction.

"Did you know that if aphids had no predators and an unlimited food supply, they would cover the earth, several miles thick, in just one summer?" She'd said it for effect, and successfully, too. As gardeners, we were all properly horrified by the thought of aphid-takeover. The strange thing about Liv, though, as I began to discover, was that you never knew which side she was rooting for.

I turned toward her, facing the huge, round eyes nestled in the triangle of yellow skin that was her face. If it weren't for the thick black hair that flowed so heavy and mammalian from her scalp, she might have been mistaken for a human-sized bug. I stood there, wondering how to answer her comment, when Karl came to my side with a smile. He introduced himself to Liv, taking her hand, and helped me over my awkwardness by engaging her in garden small-talk.

When the class was over that night, I hoped for a chance to talk to Karl alone again, but charming young men are universally appreciated, and he was chatting with everyone. I turned to leave and started down the hall. Footsteps followed, but they clicked instead of treading.

"Charlotte."

I shuddered. It was that creepy bug-woman.

The clicking came quicker, and she was beside me.

"Oh, hi," I said, pretending I hadn't heard her before.

"Hi. It is Charlotte, isn't it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, I just said your name. You must not have heard."

"Oh." Creepier and creepier. What did she want?

We left the building and headed for the parking lot.

"I was a little late tonight. What did I miss?"

"Oh, just introductions. And we talked about our individual problems with bugs."

"The next class is Thursday, right?"

"Mm-hm," I nodded. We were at my car. Say good night, Gracie.

"Oh, you must be in a hurry. Well, I'll see you Thursday."

"Okay, bye." I unlocked the door. She was still standing there. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Then, as an afterthought, she added, "Sleep tight; don't let the bed bugs bite!" She laughed at her little joke and finally walked away. Spooky.

On Thursday, I was early again and waited in the hall for class to start. Mr. Barnes, the instructor, arrived first and after him, Liv, who sat beside me at the table. She had more bizarre information to offer about the ambitions and abilities of the insect world--apparently, collecting bug statistics was a hobby of hers. She seemed pretty wrapped up in things most people would rather not think about and offered a statement about the mating habits of beetles with a look most people assume when discussing weird couples at the end of the bar.

I must have flinched, because she stopped in mid-sentence. Her triangular head nodded a little, swiveling so that my face was centered between her eyes.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, Charlotte?"

"What do you mean, because I don't like bugs?"

"No, it's not that. Most people don't like them, but you seem to have quite a horror of them." She blinked her eyes several times, rhythmically. They were really sort of hypnotic, her eyes.

"Charlotte?"

"Well, I do get disgusted," I admitted. Then I added, without really believing it, "But it's all part of gardening; I can take it."

"Well," she said, clamping and unclamping her tiny mouth, "that's how I chose the field. I'm studying to be an entomologist. When I was little, I had all sorts of insect phobias; sometimes they'd even get into my dreams." She combed at her thick hair with the fingers of her right hand, stopping half-way down to tug at a knot. "So, I tried to study the fears away, analyze them to death as it were." Here she tittered drunkenly. "It's worked pretty well."

I didn't know if I agreed, so I kept silent. The rest of the class started to arrive, and finally Karl was there, sitting just across from me. In class that day, we discussed making excursions to the individual gardens. Karl's place was first on the list.

During the break, he approached me, or us, I should say, since Liv was flitting around me like a gnat. Karl looked so handsome with his dark wavy hair and his warm eyes. Better every time I saw him. Why couldn't Liv take a hint and leave us alone? He was more polite than I could manage to be. He went out of his way to involve her in the conversation, draw her out. If his kindness was motivated by an impression that she was my friend, it was wasted effort, but maybe he was just raised better than I was.

By the time the class resumed, I was really annoyed. Instead of slipping away to pester some other group, Liv had dominated the conversation, filling my ears with her silvery hum and testing the limits of my patience. She had even managed to engage Karl in what seemed like genuine conversation. They got on topics that went beyond mere politeness. Seems she knew an old girlfriend of his; I lost interest in the chatter. The break ended, and I went back to my seat, glad to hear the bustling of the group reclaiming their seats instead of the shrill voice that was Liv's. She glided smoothly back to her chair with movements that had a creepy, silent kind of grace to them.

The day came to begin the garden tours. Karl met us at the classroom, and we followed in our cars as he led the way to his garden. It was only a few miles away, the Blake Estate, the closest thing in town to a mansion. So my Karl was one of those Blakes, the wealthy, powerful family that had practically invented Brookston. No matter; he had never set himself apart from the others out of misplaced pride. He was still his charming, handsome self.

When I arrived with Liv in tow (she'd invited herself to ride with me), Karl was greeting the others. When we were all assembled, he led the way to the kitchen garden.

It was really striking. He said that when he'd started working on it, six years ago, it had been pretty run down. No one had done much to it beyond weeding for some time. He had practically redone everything, pulling up the worn-out plants, choosing some new colors to freshen it up, and making a more harmonious composition. Mr. Barnes applauded the design and mentioned a few things Karl could do to inhibit the bugs that had been feasting on his Thyme.

We moved on toward the next stop, the informal perennial borders. As we walked along the cut stone path, someone pointed out the yellow flowers edging our way. They were Primroses, a sort of joke, Karl explained.

The borders were even more luxuriously planted than the kitchen garden. They followed a long stretch of the path, from sunlight to shade. The designs must have been difficult--there was a rather steep slope--but the effect was dazzling. Magnificent blue Delphinium and creamy Hollyhocks formed the backbone of the garden, while Rosebushes brimming with heavy red blossoms filled the center for a striking contrast. Baby's Breath and Blue Wonder spilled over the walk in alternating clumps along the front, and the rest was filled in with Porterweed, Gerber daisies, Salvias, and multitudes of other flowers. The shady end of the garden was bright with Strawberry Foxglove and diamond white Astilbe lining the background and Hostas. Cushion Spurge, and even midget Calla Lilies to the fore. It was remarkable, and Karl's animated voice in describing his efforts showed the strength of his attachment to it.

A man after my own heart.

For me, it was a difficult though a beautiful day. I had to keep reminding myself that all this wasn't mine; I'd be leaving along with the other guests soon. Even "guests" was saying a little much; it was just a class, but something about Karl was so inviting and comfortable. I didn't want to leave.

But the day was ending. The warm breeze slowed, stilled, and the light was changing from a clear white to a muddled orange. Mr. Barnes informed Karl that using copper stakes for the Hostas would keep snails away, and then he dismissed the class. We turned as a group and headed back down the yellow-lined path. I saw that Karl and Liv were discussing something up ahead, but I couldn't hear what--the path was only wide enough for two.

We all said goodbye to Karl and began to leave. I couldn't stay to chat, because I had Liv to cart home, and, besides, my car was behind Mr. Barnes'. We pulled out of the driveway in silence, and for a moment, I thought I'd get to spend the whole trip in delicious contemplation, but then Liv started in on me.

"I'm so glad I rode with you; otherwise, I wouldn't have known how to get away."

What an odd thing to say.

"Oh, that's all right." I assumed she was thanking me.

She wasn't finished. Her long fingers strummed unconsciously on the thin, flat purse across her lap. The movement made me shudder. Her head was rocking on her neck, a little like it wasn't securely attached. I wished her away, but her tiny, hard mouth began to open and she spoke again.

"I suppose I should tell him to stop calling me. I just don't want this class to become unpleasant."

Whatever was she talking about?

"Whatever are you talking about?" I asked.

"Karl."

My head spun toward her involuntarily. I expected to see her glaring at me with those huge insect eyes of hers, maybe even smiling cruelly at the bewildered look on my face. But no. She was sitting, rather like an ordinary person, with her eyes directed at her shoes in silent thought.

I turned back to the road. Surely she was joking. But Liv didn't know how to joke. He was calling her? HE was calling HER? It didn't make sense. What did they have in common? He likes plants; she likes bugs.

"Are you serious?" I asked, trying not to sound too incredulous or upset. "Karl's been calling you?"

"Yes. But I'm far too busy to see anyone. Besides, he's not my type."

Oh, and what is your type? Six legged? How could Karl like this insect of a woman who didn't even have the sense to appreciate him?

My beautiful day was never beautiful at all. It had all been an illusion.

We got to Liv's appartment, and I pulled up in silence, waiting for her to get out.

"Thank you for the ride, Charlotte. Would you like to come in for a while?"

"I thought you were too busy to see anyone." God, that sounded bitter.

"Well, there's seeing and then ther's seeing. Hey, have you seen The Swarm?"

"What?"

"You know, the movie about killer bees. I've got it on tape."

"No. Listen, Liv, I really have to go."

"Okay. I'll see you next week at my garden."

"Mm-hm."

I drove home quickly and almost ran to my garden when I was there. I sat at the table and stared unseeing into the plants. I had been getting a little too involved in my Karl fantasies. I needed to sort out my thoughts.

Hadn't he singled me out for attention? Hadn't he sought me out during our spare time? Hadn't he--But no, Liv had been with me. Had she been waiting for him to come over, using me as bait? Or had he been coming to--unthinkable! But, maybe he had been coming over to talk to her. Maybe I was the one who was in the way.

There was a rustling of leaves, and I looked up. There before me, perched on the tip of a late-blooming Columbine, was a pair of great yellow eyes, blinking into mine. There were cruel pincers before its mouth and elaborately jointed legs folded under its segmented body. It was ready to spring towards me. I was powerless in its gaze. I felt that it knew me, or knew at least what I was, an obstacle to its ambition. I stayed seated, but leaned further back in my chair, distancing my face from the creature. Surely it couldn't jump that far.

I stared into its eyes, which bobbed a little as the plant moved in a sudden breeze. There was a movement at the creature's back, and suddenly, wings unfolded. It zoomed towards my face as though it were gliding on a string. My paralysis was over. I ran frantically, foolishly into the house, locking the door behind me.

I didn't go outside at all the next day. I even skipped class so I wouldn't have to see Liv's garden. I went outside once to turn on the sprinkler, and once again to turn it off, but I didn't go near the garden.

By the time the class met again, I couldn't stay away. I had to find out where I stood. I was a little late, but everyone was in the parking lot when I arrived.

"Oh, good, I'm glad you're here," said Mr. Barnes, as I walked toward the group. "We're just on our way to see Liv's garden."

"Oh?" I said. "I thought, I thought I had missed that."

"No, you're in luck. It looked a little overcast last time, so we stayed inside."

I tried to think of something polite to say, but it didn't matter; the class was forming its little caravan. I got back into my car and joined the parade. In about fifteen minutes we had arrived at the university test gardens, where Liv had a plot of her own. I had considered turning off and going back home, but I didn't want to offend Mr. Barnes.

Liv had warned us not to expect too much, but when I finally saw it, I began to consider even the word "garden" as an exaggeration. It was more like a bed, about five feet by ten feet, filled in with various plants in no particular order. Red Roses butted heads with a pink and yellow Peonies. Taller flowers covered the front of the bed, hiding the shorter ones behind them from view. Apparently, Liv functioned without a sense of composition, a larger picture. I supposed spending most of your waking hours contemplating creatures smaller than your thumbnail could have that effect, but still it seemed strange. Her little shed, which was filled with dried bugs pinned onto papers and live bugs staring angrily out of their tiny cages, almost made me feel pity. As we inspected the place and commented on the variety of insects she had at her disposal to study, she stood still, her long, delicate fingers twisting a bit of string on the wooden table, looking something like a bug goddess as she stared vacantly past her thralls.

At the end of the day, when we were leaving, I observed Karl closely, but didn't attempt to approach him. Karl said "Goodbye, Livia. See you next week."

As he spoke, Liv's pupils seemed to dilate and her head swiveled them toward him. The first tinge of red I had ever seen on her cheeks appeared then. It reminded me of something out of a dream.

I was leaving, too, and trying to shake off the creepy feeling that her looks and her voice and her bugs gave me when I was accosted by her trilling.

"Charlotte, wait a minute."

"I need to go, Liv."

"Oh, I just wanted to say something. It's about Karl."

"Oh?" I said, suddenly interested. It sounded like a confession. I'd wondered if Karl had invited us both to stay that day and if Liv had declined for both of us. Maybe she was ashamed and wanted to apologize.

"Well, the last time I saw you, I said some pretty unkind things."

"Oh?"

"I mean about Karl. But I really don't think badly about him, not really at all." Again with the pink cheeks.

I couldn't tell what she was getting at, but then she turned those big eyes on me, blinking at me like, like I was an obstacle to her ambition.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"I just thought you'd like to know," said her small clamping mouth, but it seemed there was something more behind it.

I left.

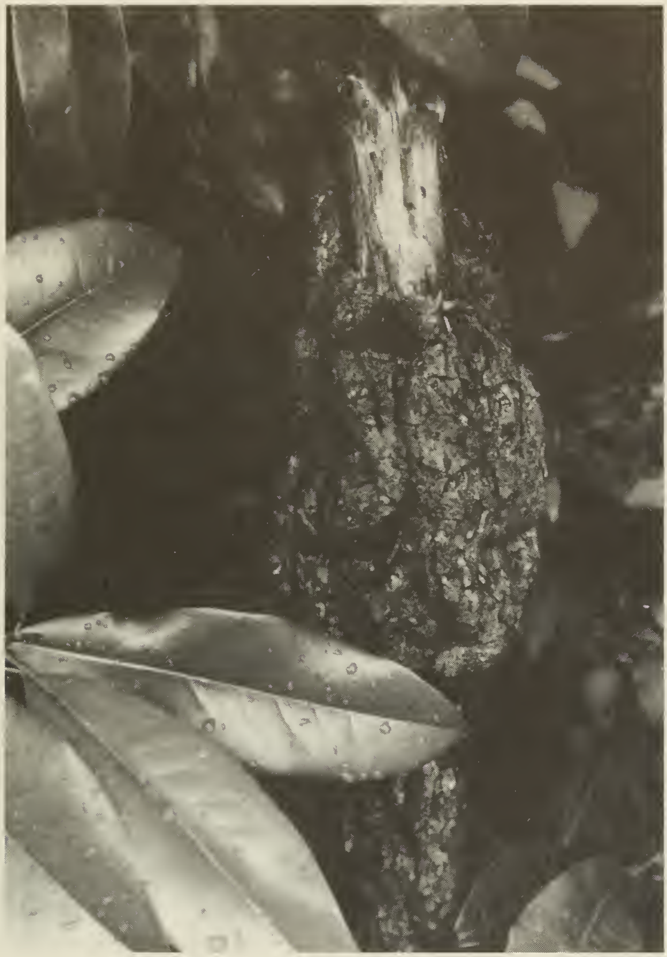
I didn't go back to class again.

One day that fall I saw an article in the Brookston Post announcing the engagement of Livia Olson to Karl Blake. I had a dream that night about Liv's garden. Her nervous fingers had been engaged in shredding one of my English Roses instead of twisting about a bit of old string. I had stared at the motions in a trance and, when I heard Karl's voice saying, "Goodbye, Livia. See you next week," something glistened at her hands. The golden color I had thought was my Rose had become a shining circle on one of those long delicate fingers, and beautiful wings had jutted suddenly out of her back. I stood frozen, staring in awe.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, Charlotte?" came the thin, trilling voice. I raised my eyes to hers and she leapt up into the air flying toward my open mouth, mesmerizing me with her huge eyes. I woke up screaming, terrified, unable to relax.

The winter was a difficult time, with no flowers to help me through. But it's spring now.

Yes, it's spring now, and there are more aphids than ever on my roses.



Dawn's Dew
Vickie Williams

E’la

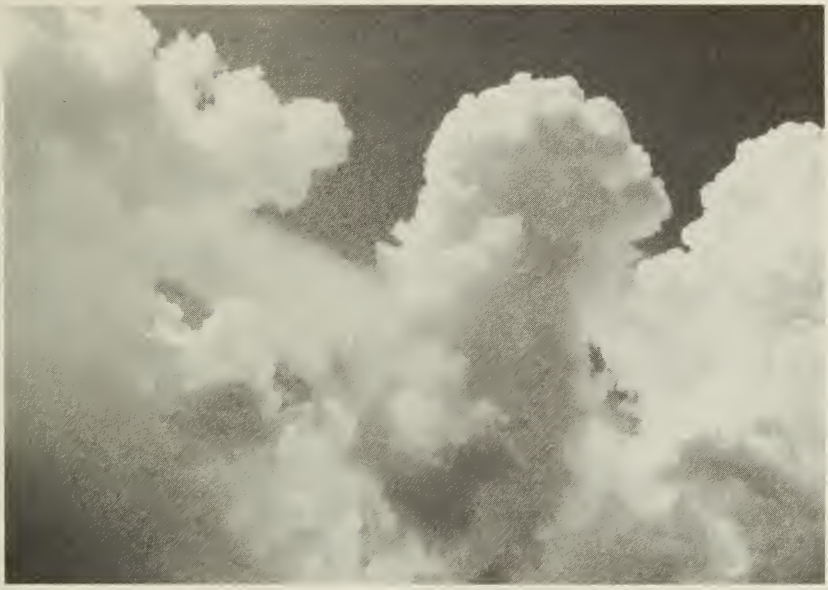
At the foot of blue mountains cold in the sun
In the breast of her hills a river does wind
From her hard black bones white waters are spun
Just like the wind it’s not cruel or kind

Where emeralds can bleed and weep with the sky
It’s here I saw E’la child of the wood
The blue and green water flowed in her eyes
Wat'ry diamond bracelets danced where she stood.

The tears of the mountain shed from the snow
The spirit was waiting, jaws opened wide
To pull me down to boiling froth below
With you my sweet E’la there by my side

If mountains could cry if mountains could pray
No one beats the river is all she’d say

Jim Sheehan



Cloud Study #46

Setona Page